

## [\*\*A Sonata Is Almost A Sonnet\*\*](#) by [\*\*lilies\\_in\\_a\\_vase\*\*](#)

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Abusive Neil Hargrove, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Angst with a Happy Ending, Billy Hargrove & Maxine "Max" Mayfield Bonding, Billy Hargrove & Maxine "Max" Mayfield Have a Good Relationship, Billy Hargrove Being Less of an Asshole, Billy Hargrove Deserves Better, Billy Hargrove Is Bad at Feelings, Billy Hargrove Needs Love, Billy Hargrove Needs a Hug, Billy Hargrove Tries to Be a Better Sibling, Billy's a cellist, Cello, Chapter 1 is Pre-Season 1, Chapter 2 is Season 2, Chapter 3 is Season 3, Child Abuse, Concerts, Gay Billy Hargrove, Gen, Good Sibling Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Hurt Billy Hargrove, Hurt/Comfort, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, Implied/Referenced Sexual Assault, Implied/Referenced Underage Sex, M/M, Max and Billy in California, Neil Hargrove Being an Asshole, Neil Hargrove is His Own Warning, Neil Hargrove's A+ Parenting, POV Billy Hargrove, Protective Billy Hargrove, Protective Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Season/Series 02, kind teacher, no beta we die like men

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**Summary:**

Billy is seven years old the first time he touches a cello. It doesn't

change everything, doesn't even change a lot of things, really. But it does change... something.

# **1. Chapter 1**

## **Author's Note:**

This is... probably one of my weirder ideas, I have to say. But, I'm also really proud of it, so I hope you enjoy!

(Did I actually write a timeline from when I'm having Billy being born in order for myself to keep track of this? I did. Did I feel slightly insane doing that? You can bet I did!)

## **TRIGGER WARNING:**

There are mentions of Neil abusing Billy throughout this fic, and at one point Billy assumes he's supposed to sleep with his teacher as payback. (If there's anything else I should add, please let me know!)

## **Disclaimer:**

I don't own "Stranger Things", and the songs mentioned are "Nocturne in C Sharp" by Frédéric Chopin, "Cello Concerto No. 1" by Franz Joseph Haydn, and "Serenade For Strings" by Antonín Dvořák. (If anyone's interested I'd love to recommend my favourite versions of these, haha). Oh, and Metallica's debut album, "Kill 'Em All".

Billy is seven years old the first time he touches a cello. His mum left a week ago, his dad punched him while shouting at him that it was his fault, and Billy got into his first fight during recess.

Miss Adams sees the fight, and hands the other kid over to another teacher, while she takes Billy with her into her classroom. Miss

Adams is young, having just finished her education, although to seven year old Billy she's just like any other adult. He can see she's not one hundred though, not like Mrs. Wilson who teaches them maths.

She's not Billy's teacher, either, so Billy hasn't ever been in her classroom. He barely listens as she goes on about how it's bad to start a fight, how he should use his words and not his fists to resolve an argument, how he should come to them if somebody says something that hurts him, and wonders if he should ask them why his dad obviously doesn't agree. Billy's smart though, and Billy's scared, and he doesn't dare say anything in case his dad finds out. Doesn't think he'd like hearing Billy's talking back to his teachers. He hates it when Billy talks back to him.

So Billy lets his eyes wander, but there's not much of interest in the classroom. It looks just like any other classroom Billy's been in. Miss Adams has the alphabet along one wall, each letter a fun colour with a drawing next to it taking up one paper. She's drawn a sun in the upper left corner of the blackboard. Billy doesn't get why they're called 'blackboards' when they're green. His eyes land on the corner of the room, behind Miss Adams' desk, where she has some big... *thing* leaning against the wall. It's a case of some sort, and shaped vaguely like a guitar, but bigger. Much bigger.

It takes a couple seconds for it to register that Miss Adams has stopped talking. She's looking at Billy with this sort of amused expression. Her eyes are kind.

Perhaps that is why Billy dares to open his mouth and speak. "What is that?" he asks, and points towards the corner.

Miss Adams' smile widens, and she stands up from her chair, and goes over to lift the thing. She brings it back to Billy, lays it down on the floor and unfastens the clasp on the side, pulls the zipper back. She opens it, and Billy's mouth falls open.

He's seen a violin before, on TV, and this looks like one, dark brownish red that shines in the California sunlight streaming in through the window when Miss Adams lifts it up. It's much, much bigger though.

There's a little rod sticking out from the bottom of it that Miss Adams pulls on so it becomes longer. She looks up at Billy and smiles.

"This is my cello," she says, and in his head Billy repeats the word.  
"Have you ever seen a cello before?"

Billy shakes his head.

"Okay. This," she says, and lifts up a long wooden stick. She holds it out so Billy can see, and it looks like it has a thousand thin little hairs running along the wooden part. "Is my bow. You have to tighten it. See?" She screws something at the bottom of the wood, and the hairs tighten. Billy watches wide eyed. "And then, you put a little rosin on." She grabs a small dark thing in a white handkerchief, and drags it over the hairs, back and forth a few times. "It helps the friction and the sound," she explains.

Miss Adams sits back on her chair in front of Billy, and reaches down, grabbing the cello and putting it in front of her, strings towards Billy. She smiles at him, like she's about to tell him a secret, and puts the bow against the strings.

She drags it against them, and Billy gasps at the first sound of music. There's so much happening, he doesn't know what to focus on. The bow goes back and forth, sometimes hitting one string, sometimes hitting two, and her fingers move so quickly it's almost a blur. Sometimes, her hand shakes, and it makes the notes sound like the waves Billy loves to swim in and is learning to surf on. He feels all giddy when she does it, like he's a jack-in-the-box about to jump out of his seat.

Miss Adams laughs a little when she's finished. It's a nice laugh, sounds happy the way his mum's used to.

"Here," she says, and hands Billy the cello. "Hold it by its neck."

Billy's eyes widen, but he does as he's told. The wood feels smooth beneath his hand. Miss Adams stands up, and crouches down beside Billy's chair. She holds up the bow.

"This is how you hold it," she says, and Billy sees she's got her thumb underneath the wood, between it and the hairs. The rest of her fingers are on top of it, leaning over the side. She hands the bow to Billy, and he tries to copy her grip. He beams when Miss Adams claps her hands together and says: "Yes! You're learning so quickly! I didn't even get it on my first try."

She moves his hand higher up on the neck of the cello, but doesn't tell him to press on any strings the way he saw her do.

“My cello is too big for you, but try to draw the bow against the strings.”

Billy does so, and feels a full body shiver go through him at the sound it makes when the hairs are drawn across the strings. He does it again, and has to force himself to sit still. He doesn’t know if he’s ever been so careful in his life. He doesn’t want to risk damaging the cello. It feels heavy, but also so, so fragile.

“What do you think?” Miss Adams asks.

“Cool,” Billy says. It’s more than cool, but Billy doesn’t yet know the words to explain how he feels.

“Yeah?” Miss Adams laughs. “Well, in that case. My parents kept all my old cellos, that I had before I outgrew them. I could bring one I think would fit you next week, if you want? And I can teach you a little more?”

Billy bites his lip, and nods quickly.

Miss Adams smiles at him, and ruffles his hair. Billy only ever let his mum do that. He thinks he might let Miss Adams do it, too. “Great. I think you have class in a few minutes. See you next week, Billy.”

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“What’s got you looking like that, then?” Neil asks him at dinner later that day. ‘Like that’ just means ‘smiling, grinning down at your pizza like Christmas came early’. Billy can barely contain his excitement.

“My teacher at school told me she’d teach me how to play cello.”

For all that Billy’s gotten better at it, he wasn’t expecting his dad’s hit. He slaps Billy against the cheek and Billy can’t quite stop his eyes from welling up, although he does try, he really does.

“No son of mine is going to play the *fucking cello*,” Neil spits. Billy flinches at the venom in his voice. “I’m not going to pay for you to take *music lessons*. You’ll join a sport. And you’ll thank your teacher for the offer but tell her you’re a man and not some little fag.” Billy doesn’t even know what that word means. His dad stands up, and goes to take his plate out to the living room. “And stop crying, you’re not a pussy,” he tells him on the way out.

Billy swallows a sob, and bites into his knuckle. He forces down the rest of his pizza.

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Billy starts playing soccer, and when he tires of that, he joins the basketball team. But that happens later. First, Billy avoids going near Miss Adams classroom for the whole of next week.

But then on his last lesson on Friday, she's waiting outside Billy's classroom.

"Can I speak to you, Billy?" she asks, and Billy's tempted to make up an excuse, to tell her he has to get home or his dad will wonder where he is.

But Billy's barely been able to stop himself from thinking of her cello when awake, and two nights ago he dreamt that he was stuck in a dark empty space with his dad running after him, Billy's face already aching, when suddenly the ceiling opened up and a bow, enormous, came down. The hair on it was golden, and Billy threw himself on it and climbed upwards. He came to his mum's shoulder. She was big and tall like a giant, and her hair matched the one of the bow he'd used to get to her. He sat down in her shoulder, like a parrot on a pirate, and turned around to see Miss Adams, as big as his mum, playing the cello. As she played, his dad was thrown out of the hollow inside of the cello, and disappeared.

So instead he nods, and holds the strap of his backpack tighter, and follows after her into her empty classroom. His eyes immediately seek out the corner, and he sees a smaller case propped up beside it. Billy doesn't know if he wants to scream or cry.

Miss Adams leans back against her desk. She follows Billy's gaze and frowns. "You want to tell me why you never came by this week? I waited for you." She says it kindly, in that soft voice of hers, but Billy still feels like he's being reprimanded.

He bows his head. “I’m sorry.” He thinks back to what his dad said, tries to figure out which excuse she will be most likely to accept. “My dad said we can’t afford music lessons.”

“Oh!” Miss Adams says, laughs a little. She sounds relieved. “I wasn’t planning on asking you to pay, Billy. It just seemed like you enjoyed it, so I thought it would be fun.”

Billy stares down at the ground, rubs one shoe over the toes of the other. “He also said it wasn’t manly and that I should join a sport instead. He doesn’t like me playing music, Miss Adams.” He glances up at her through his hair, and sees her brows furrow again.

“I see. Well... He doesn’t need to know, does he? What he doesn’t know can’t bother him.”

Billy gapes at her. Can’t believe he’s hearing an adult, a *teacher*, telling him to lie.

Miss Adams smiles. “Tell you what. Let’s make a deal. If you stop getting into fights,” Billy had pushed another kid earlier this week, had pulled at a third ones hair. “Then you can come here after your last lesson, every day if you want. And I’ll teach you how to play, and help you with homework if you need it, and in return you won’t have to go to any detentions. Alright?”

It’s the best deal Billy’s ever heard of.

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Six months after Billy's mum left, Neil brings home his first new girlfriend.

She's nice, pretty but not beautiful like his mum, and has a sweet laugh. She's a redhead, and pinches Billy's cheeks the way he's heard the other kids say their grandma's do.

Billy sits through a dinner with her and his dad on his best behaviour, and tries to not think about his mum. But he acts like the epitome of a well-mannered boy, and his dad gives him ice cream for dessert.

It's nice up until the point where Billy has to go to bed, and she doesn't leave. Instead, Billy hears her and his dad speak in soft voices in the living room, followed by a giggle and two bodies fumbling into his parents' bedroom. Billy'd been close to falling asleep, but a muffled crash against the wall right outside his room has him wide awake.

He wonders if Neil is hurting her, the way he'd hurt Billy's mum and now Billy. His hands tremble where they clutch at his covers.

But then he hears a giggle, and the closing of a door. Billy's bedroom is next to Neil's, and the walls are thin.

He hears everything. He wishes he didn't, and pulls his pillow over his ears.

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"You're teacher tells me you're sleeping during class. She thought about giving you detention, but I convinced her not to. You want to tell me what's going on?"

"I can't sleep," Billy mumbles.

"And why can't you sleep?"

Billy grimaces. "Dad has new girlfriends. They're... loud, at night." He purses his lips, twists them a little. Feels nauseous just thinking about the sounds he's heard.

Miss Adams seems to understand. Her eyes go a little wider, and she sighs. "I see. Every night?"

“No. But... a lot. Enough. I’m just... I’m tired.” He can’t help yawning.

Miss Adams nods, and smiles at him. Asks him to get out the cello, and starts his lesson.

The next day, she cuts the lesson short after half an hour, and leads Billy back to her office. She’s got a small couch there, green and ugly but with thick cushions and a pillow and blanket. She lets him go to sleep while she grades tests from the day before and prepares the upcoming lessons for her students.

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The last day of elementary school, at the cusp of the summer before Billy starts middle school, Miss Adams come up to him.

“Guess what I’m going to do?” she says, and Billy frowns, bites his lip the way his mum said he does when he tries to really think hard on something. He doesn’t know, Miss Adams could do anything, she’s an adult with money and a car and her own place to live and parents who let her play music and kept her old cellos. But Billy had wanted to talk to her, because he’s been worrying for the past week, every day since he realised he wouldn’t go to school here anymore, and so wouldn’t be able to play any more cello.

“I don’t know,” he eventually says.

Miss Adams beams, and she tells him she's not going to keep working at the elementary school, that she's moving with Billy, coming to be a teacher at his new school. But she doesn't know if she'll be able to be his teacher, not that it matters, because she'll be *there*, she's *coming with him*, she'll keep teaching him and helping him with homework and letting him sleep when he's tired, and Billy hugs her.

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The newest girl is called Mary.

She's young, with big blonde waves of hair, bigger and shorter than his mum's. Billy clutches his Saint Christopher pendant, the one that belonged to his mum, the one he woke up with around his neck the morning he found out she'd left. His mum would take him to church sometimes, although she never really said she believed in everything they told them there. She'd always tell Billy the most important thing was to be kind, and to think before he does something, to think about how it could hurt someone. If she'd seen him now, Billy doesn't think she'd be very proud, but Billy also doesn't understand how she could decide to leave him when she left, if the most important thing is to be kind and think about what you do and who you might hurt. Billy doesn't really like to think about that.

His dad likes to talk about God, but where his mum would mention him as kind, as forgiving and understanding, his dad never takes him to church, and only ever talks about God when he wants to warn Billy that he'll end up burning in Hell forever if he continues on the

path he's on. Billy doesn't like to think about Forever.

His mum told him she'd love him Forever, the people in church said marriages are supposed to last Forever, and his dad says he'll keep hurting, his existence will only be pain, Forever.

The point, anyway, is that Billy knows who the Virgin Mary is. And he knows what being a virgin is, he knows about sex , has heard it whispered from the lips of the older kids, and Billy knows adults are supposed to have sex with those they date, but he also knows that his dad's Mary is as far from the real Mary as you can get. Her parents gave her the wrong name.

Billy thinks she's a Bitch. It's a new word he's learned, and he's not really entirely certain what it means, but he knows it's a bad word, and he thinks it probably fits Mary well.

She ignores Billy, she gets prissy when his dad doesn't do what she wants, when he doesn't take her for long drives into the sunset or always gets her flowers when they see each other, she doesn't like that Billy sits at the table in the kitchen doing his homework because his bedroom doesn't have a desk after his dad broke it. She doesn't like Billy, and that's fair.

Billy doesn't like her.

Billy doesn't like *them*. All the girls who come over. They're just a string of women in Neil's pussy parade, although he doesn't think of it that way until he's halfway through with middle school.

He doesn't like them, because none of them stay. They step into his life for a snapshot, and then they leave when his father's real character starts to shine through.

And then Susan comes. And with her, she brings a flaming spitfire of a little girl. Maxine, who tells him the second she meets him that her name isn't *that*, it's *Max*, thank you very much. Max is nine, and Billy's twelve, and he doesn't hate her.

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"I think you're ready."

"For what?"

"*Vibrato*." Miss Adams says the word as though it's a spell, a portal to a magic world. Once Billy learns how to do it, he will find out that it basically *is*. "When you practice here with me, I want you to imagine that you've got gum on your fingers, that they're sticking to the fingerboard, okay? But then, when you practice at home, you can take a pencil, and I want you to practice shaking your hand. You can do it as a big move, shaking your whole arm from the elbow up to your fingers, or you can try to just move your hand. Have your palm fluttering like it's in the wind, but remember! The tips of your fingers are stuck, sucked into the strings.Or the pencil."

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Max isn't that bad, she just stares at him when he practices *vibrato*, and asks him if there's something wrong with him because his hand won't stop shaking. Billy flicks her head and tells her to shut up, and she sticks her tongue out at him.

In the privacy of his own bedroom, Billy stares up at the ceiling and grins, thinking that it might be fun to have a sister. At least Max doesn't seem like one of the stupid girls in Billy's class who only care about what their hair or clothes look like, Max seems like someone who'd be able to keep up with him.

Susan's the first girlfriend Neil's brought home that has a kid, that has been married before. And Billy thinks that maybe that means this will be more permanent, because they've introduced him to Max, and that means they'll probably move in together, and Billy thinks it'll be nice to not be alone with the secret anymore.

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Neil and Susan get married. A good and proper one, in a church,

nothing like "*The hippie shit Billy's mum made me do*", and Billy sits next to Max, him feeling like a fish on dry land, dressed in a black suit in the sweltering California heat, her with a sullen face and crossed arms over the quite frankly enormous dresses she'd been forced into.

But just because Billy likes Max, because he feels like they might come to an understanding, doesn't mean that he has to like Susan.

The day after the wedding, Billy helps his dad move in their stuff because Susan's house is bigger, and it's closer to the beach so Billy's not complaining, except for one small part of him that thinks that his mum wouldn't know where to find him if she ever came looking, and that Friday the newlyweds fuck off, leaving Billy in charge until Sunday evening, and he orders pizza for himself and Max and they watch movies for hours every night, Billy taking her to the beach during the day. He asks her if she wants to learn how to surf, but she says no, looking longingly at the boys who skate by on the boulevard, but she's a good swimmer still, and she sits on the edge of Billy's board as he surfs. He's going to look back on their time in California, and he's going to realise that first weekend was the best days they had there.

While packing his childhood room up into boxes, he'd found a little envelope in the back of the only photo album Billy owned, not even half filled with pictures of the first three years of Billy's life. His mum had put it in the bottom of his closet, where his dad never looked, but going through it now, five years after she left, the yellowing envelope falls out and lands in his lap.

Billy picks it up, finds a couple dollar bills, and laughs at the thought that his mum had thought that would make up for leaving in the night, leaving him to the same fate she'd had. But there's not only

money, there. There's a new photograph, one Billy can't even remember when she'd taken, but he's six or seven years old in it, and then, the last thing to fall out, is a ring. Billy recognises it immediately. It's silver, plain, and it's one of a pair of twins. His mum had worn them both, every day, on the same finger, and Billy imagines she's still wearing one of them. She'd left the other for him.

He doesn't know what it means, but he puts it on for the first time after his dad has left with his new wife, and sitting in the sand on the beach, shirt off and sunglasses on, Max leans over and stares at the Saint Christopher, glittering in the sunlight.

"I've never seen a boy wear a necklace before," she tells him.

"It's not a necklace," Billy says, because he's learned not to call it that, after he wore it on the outside of his clothes at school another kid tried to bully him about it. That kid got a taste of Billy's knuckles in his face, and when he went to Miss Adams after school she took one look at the blood on his knuckles and had a talk with him. She didn't let him play that day, instead spending the whole hour they had discussing why he couldn't go punching every time people were mean to him. "It's a pendant. And it's a Saint. My mum gave it to me." He holds up his left hand, and shows her the ring on the middle finger. "This one, too."

"Oh," Max says, her red hair wet and clinging to her forehead in large chunks and weird shapes that Billy wants to laugh at. "What happened to her?"

"She left."

“Oh,” she says again. “My dad divorced my mum, but I still see him every other weekend.”

*Lucky you ,* Billy thinks.

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Susan listens to classical music while she cooks. Perhaps it ought to make Billy like her more, but it has the opposite effect. Especially when his dad doesn’t say anything, doesn’t tell her to change stations if he happens to walk in while she’s at the stove.

Billy doesn’t realise he’s started humming along until he feels someone staring at him.

He looks up from his homework to find Susan looking curiously at him. Billy scrambles for an explanation. “My teacher plays that shit for us. It... It got stuck in my head.”

“Okay,” Susan answers simply.

Billy avoids the kitchen when Susan’s cooking, after that.

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Max does stay with her dad every other weekend, but then one Friday when Billy gets home after his lesson with Miss Adams, she's not there. Billy's been walking home since he was seven, but Susan always picks up Max, so she's home when Billy gets there.

She's on the couch in the living room, and it looks like she's been crying, a box of tissues beside her, a couple used ones on the coffee table. Billy hopes she cleans it up before his dad gets home.

But his immediate thought is that something happened, something his dad will find a way to blame on him, and then Billy won't be able to go surfing for a couple days until the bruises fade.

But his dad's not home, and neither is Max. What with Susan's current state, Billy doesn't know if that is good or not.

He stops in the doorway to the living room. "Where's Max?"

"She ran away to the beach. She didn't want to talk to me." She looks up at him, and her eyes are big and teary. "Can you go and see if you can get her to come home?" It's the first time Susan's asked him to do anything.

Billy just nods, slowly, a little fearful. “Yeah. Yeah, okay.”

He finds her sitting in the sand with her knees pulled up to her chest, her hair like a beacon. Billy sits down beside her. She’s staring out at the waves, but he turns to look at her.

“Hey, shitbird, what’s got you so upset you ran away from your mum?”

She doesn’t answer, just sniffles and pulls her sleeve down over her hand, trying to dry her eyes without getting sand in them.

“Max? Hey, what’s wrong?”

“He’s leaving,” she whispers.

“Who’s leaving? Max?”

“My dad,” she sobs. “He called my mum to tell her he’s moving away, that he’ll be too far away for me to visit during the weekend. He’s leaving me behind.”

*Just like my mum left me*, Billy thinks. “You could still call him?” he tries.

Max shakes her head. “It won’t be the same. He gives... He gives the best hugs.”

“I know it won’t be the same. But it’ll be something, at least. You know what I’d give, to have had my mum leave a phone number behind?” He doesn’t mean for it to come out as irritated as it does, because he understands what Max is feeling, but she’s still better off than him. She’s got a mum who loves her, and a dad who’s moving, yes, and it hurts, but he’s not abandoning her.

Max begins crying in earnest, now, and she throws her arms around his neck. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, I forgot.”

Billy’s not hugged anyone since Miss Adams in elementary school, so he’s caught off guard for a whole five seconds before he brings his arms to hug her back. He’s not going to tell her about his own dad, Billy thinks, not when he’s the only dad Max is going to have at hand, not when he hasn’t done anything to hurt her yet.

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Max starts to skateboard, and the first time she falls off and breaks the skin on her knee, Billy’s gets pushed into his new desk and slapped across the face for letting her get hurt.

And then, Billy considers telling Max, making her understand that

there are new rules in place, and he's her big brother and they're family now and all they have is each other, and what she does and what happens to her has consequences for what happens to Billy, but then he remembers that Max only has him because her dad left her and Susan's too in love to care. And he realises that he doesn't want to break her heart, he doesn't want her to realise what kind of person her stepdad is, not when she seems to like him, not when Billy saw her whole face light up as she opened the skateboard Billy's dad bought her.

And so Billy makes himself a promise. He's going to protect Max, but he's also going to protect himself. And if that means sometimes being an ass to her, than so be it.

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Billy's always had long hair, partly because he liked it and his mum liked it, and partly because Neil couldn't be bothered taking him to cut it for months on time.

But it isn't until the last month of middle school, that Billy goes to the hairdresser alone for the first time, Susan having handed him money before he left, and waiting for his turn he looks through the magazines there because he's bored. That's when he sees it, that's when he goes to sit in the chair, and asks for a mullet.

Max laughs when she sees him, and Neil pulls at his hair when they're alone in the room, but before going to bed that night Billy

looks at himself in the mirror and thinks ‘Yes, yes, *this is me*’.

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He starts high school in the autumn of ‘82. With high school comes parties, and relationships, and the talking that began in middle school becomes more explicit as the boys start to openly stare at girls, no longer hiding their crushes from their friends and pretending they don’t blush.

And Billy realises that while the other boys will try to ask the girls out on dates, Billy’s too preoccupied staring at the guys on the beach, at their muscular bodies and tan skin.

But he’s not alone, and whispered from older boys who’ve seen his looks, he learns a secret language.

He’s sitting in someone’s basement, drunk on his first beer, the room filled with cigarette smoke and the floor above his head thumping to the sound of dancing bodies, when he leans his head to the side and lets someone’s brother, who works at a tattoo parlour, pierce his left ear.

He discovers, when he gets home, hung over and nauseous, that whoever did it was responsible enough to write down instructions for how to care for it until it heals on a piece of paper, sticking it down

into Billy's front pocket.

Max is the first to notice it, trying to touch the little stud whenever he's lying tanning in the sand, but he shoves her away every time.

"Fuck off, you'll get it infected."

"Where did you do it? I want one, too."

"You're too young," Billy says, and Max wrinkles her nose at him and looks like she wants to argue, but Susan calls for her, and she leaves him alone.

Susan notices next, but she doesn't say anything, Billy just sees her eyes widen for a fraction of a second.

Neil makes his awareness well known, however, but it isn't until after its healed, and Billy's managed to buy himself a new earring, long and dangling, reflecting the sun when he's outside. He calls Billy a fag, and Billy wants to laugh, because if only his dad new, wants to shout at him 'Yes! So what?!' but he does neither. He doesn't say anything, because if there's one thing Billy's learned, it's that talking back will always get you wounded.

Billy gets his ears pierced, and is rewarded with a punch that makes him double over. Miss Adams laughs when she sees him, though, telling him he looks nice and is growing up quicker than she can understand. And Max thinks he's cool. Billy decides to count it as a

winner.

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Miss Adams can't follow him to high school, though, but they decide that he'll keep coming to the middle school to play. Billy's days are slightly longer than Max', so there's not much risk in running into her at her own school, as she's usually halfway home by the time Billy gets there.

So he goes to Max' school for his lessons, which are less lessons nowadays and more a safe place for him to practice.

"You're a wonder, Billy," Miss Adams tells him one day during Billy's freshman year. "You really are. I've never met anyone who learned so quickly, who could play so well. It's like the instruments a part of you, like it's an extension of your soul. It's... magnificent. Truly."

Billy blushes, looking down at Miss Adams' cello. It's her own, her current cello, the first cello he'd ever seen that first time he stepped foot into her classroom when he was seven years old. He'd had a growth spurt over the summer, and when he'd come back Miss Adams had taken one look at him and told him he was ready for the full sized cello, the 4/4 one, and had handed over her own. It had felt like a ceremony, like he'd passed from child to teenager, to almost adult. When she gets him a new piece, she usually plays it for him once, before handing the cello to him, and sometimes Billy doesn't even have to look at the sheet music to replicate what he hears.

Sometimes he gets it completely right on the first try.

"I know we've talked about your dad," she continues, "That he wouldn't like knowing you played, but please Billy, I know a couple people at the academy and they're having auditions, entrance exams, for possible new students. Please, for your own sake, let me take you there? I'm afraid you don't understand exactly how good you are."

"What if I get in?"

"You won't have to go. We can do it unofficially, it's a little unorthodox but they owe me a favour, so your dad wouldn't ever have to find out. Or... If you end up wanting to go, then we'll talk about that then, okay? I could have a meeting with your dad about it."

It doesn't matter what Billy wants, and if Billy can do anything about it, then Miss Adams won't ever have to meet his dad. But Billy does want to go, the more she talks about it the more interested he gets, and he has to admit it would be nice to hear what someone else thinks about his playing.

Because Billy doesn't know what a normal progression in music is like, he doesn't know if he's better than others his age, or others who have played the amount of years Billy has. All he has to listen to and compare is Miss Adams and the recordings she plays for him.

So Billy says yes, and agrees.

---

Billy skips school after lunch, instead going over to the middle school's teachers' car park and waiting there for Miss Adams. He'd thought about faking being sick but had been too worried they'd call home, so he decided to just skip the rest of the day instead. If his dad finds out, he'll deal with whatever his punishment is then.

The car ride is half an hour long, Billy spending the time staring at his sheet music and trying to make sure he has it memorised. This may be his only chance, and Billy wants to impress them.

The music academy is big, and beautiful, and the inside is the poshest and fanciest Billy's ever seen, the floor is so shiny Billy can see his reflection in it, a giant chandelier hanging in the entrance hallway. In the distance, from an open door somewhere, Billy hears the sound of a sole opera singer practicing.

He feels out of place, so he sticks close to Miss Adams, trailing behind her as she leads him down a hallway to stand outside a pair of double doors. She seems to know her way around, and not for the first time, Billy wonders about her background and how she came to be an elementary and middle school teacher. He leans against the wall, the case with her cello prohibiting his back from hitting it, as they wait for his turn.

Eventually, the door opens, and a girl Billy's age trails out, neither looking particularly relieved or sad, her eyebrows furrowed and sheet

music clutch tightly in one hand. He follows movement down to her hand, tapping against her hips, and figures her lack of instrument must mean she's a pianist. He'd left his sheet music in the car. He hopes he won't fumble and forget, thinks that maybe he should have brought it in with him anyway.

"William Hargrove?" a stern voice calls, but when Billy looks up it's a young woman smiling kindly at him from the open doorway.

"Yes," Billy says, right as Miss Adams takes his arm and pushes him forward.

"Go on," she says.

Billy turns back to look at her, the case obscuring part of his vision.  
"You're not coming with?"

She smiles at him. "I'll wait for you out here. You'll be fine. You're going to do great, you don't need me in there with you." She ruffles his hair, and Billy tries to summon bravery.

He nods, once, quickly, and follows the other woman inside.

There are big windows on one side, afternoon sunlight streaming in and gleaming off the grand piano in the middle of the room. Beside it, there's a chair, and in front of the chair sits a small group of men and women behind a long table, papers and pens and mugs of coffee in front of each of them. Billy can smell it in the air, coffee and old

wood.

“This the boy Donna recommend?” an older woman asks, and Billy swallows. Donna, he thinks, must be Miss Adams’ first name.

“It is,” the woman who’d led him in says, gesturing for Billy to sit down in the chair in front of them. She leans against the wall, crossing her arms, and Billy feels shaky as he crouches down by the chair, gently swinging the case of his back and placing it on the floor. He does his best to calm the tremble in his fingertips as he opens it, tightening the hairs of the bow.

He sits down on the chair, lifting the cello and placing it between his legs, the neck leaning back against his chest and shoulder.

“When you’re ready,” the older woman says, nodding at him to begin.

This is the first time Billy’s performed in front of an audience bigger than Miss Adams. He breathes deeply for a couple seconds, and closes his eyes so he won’t have to look at them. For all his worries about sheet music earlier, Billy is confident in his ability. He knows this song, he’s played it countless of times. *Gum*, he thinks, *Your fingertips are sticky like gum*.

And the first note of Chopin’s *Nocturne in C Sharp Minor* rings out across the room.

Billy doesn't open his eyes until the song's finished, and when he does, he can tell they're impressed. There's a small smile pulling on the older woman's lips.

Billy can't help a grin himself, but he hurries to put the cello and bow back in the case, the younger woman following him to the door.

"How'd it go?" Miss Adams asks as the door closes behind him.  
"Come on, tell me everything!"

They come to a stop down the corridor, walking a couple steps from the door so they're not in the way for anyone else coming through.

Billy's about to answer, about to share his excitement, when his eyes land on two boys standing by the landing of the staircase. One's black haired, the other brown haired, both in matching white dress shirts and pressed pants and violin cases. And they're *laughing*, whispering to each other.

They're making fun of him, Billy realises, laughing and leering and pointing, critiquing his hair, his clothes, his goddamn earring.

Billy doesn't fit, he doesn't fit the look of a musician, especially not a classical one, not with his body that he's been working on since he was eleven, trying to build and build and build until all the baby fat is replaced by muscle and adult women start to send flirty looks his way on the beach. Billy doesn't belong, even though he's been playing since he was seven and his fingers are long and slim and the tips of the left ones have turned hard from pressing on strings almost every day for the last seven years.

And Billy's gets angry, he gets really fucking angry, because Billy knows he's good. He's good, he's really good, he'd like to bet money on the fact that he's probably better than these little shits, but it doesn't help, because they look like they belong here, and Billy *doesn't*.

Miss Adams must have caught on by now, must have followed his gaze and realised what's about to happen, because she says "No, Billy—" and tries to take his arm, tries to hold him back, but it's too late, Billy's already storming forward and punching one of them, the louder one, the *meaner* one, in the face.

And because he's thin, and lanky, and Billy's on his way towards being built like a brick, he goes down after one punch to the face, blood starting to trickle in between his fingers as he whines from between them, holding his nose as though he expects it to fall off, his friend screaming and falling to his knees beside him.

Miss Adams grabs Billy by the shoulders and pulls him back, even though Billy's not about to go after the kid again. He's satisfied with just the one punch.

But it's too late. One of the teachers has already come rushing towards them, the young woman in tow, and the kid and his friend are shouting about how Billy pushed him, how Billy attacked him, how his nose is probably broken (it isn't - Billy knows what a broken nose feels like and he knows how hard to hit to achieve it). But the teacher looks a little horrified, turns a glare from Billy to Miss Adams, and says "We don't condone violence" and with that, Billy's chance is gone.

Later, Miss Adams will tell him that she talked to the teachers, that she made it clear to them that the other kid was bullying him, and that they shouldn't accept him into their school either, and later, Billy will think about the kids perfectly combed hair and dress shirt and strict black pants and wonder if the fact that he hurt Billy matters at all when he has all that.

He's ashamed of it, but if he's honest, Billy expects Miss Adams to hurt him too. Like this will be the final straw before she snaps. He doesn't think she'd hit him, but he waits for her to shout at him, to scream about how fucking stupid he is or what a horrible person he is, but she doesn't. She just acts disappointed. Billy thinks that might be worse.

---

The summer between freshman and sophomore year, Billy discovers Metallica.

Miss Adams has made sure to not only teach him how to read the sheet music, but how to *understand* it. And Billy knows it so well, has practiced listening until he can hear the notes, that he spends hours at a time listening to Metallica's Kill 'Em All, until he's pretty certain he's managed to get the songs down as notes for him to play.

He presents the little compendium he's made for Miss Adams the first day he sees her after summer break, and her eyes widen. When he finally, after months of waiting, gets his hands the cello again, and

plays everything correctly, she breaks out into a wide smile.

She asks him to practice writing his own songs, after that, and Billy mostly sticks to classical, although sometimes, he dreams about being part of a metal or rock band, but playing the cello instead of the guitar.

---

At the start of Christmas break, Billy happens to walk past the doorway when his dad's on the phone in the kitchen. He's got his back to Billy, and Billy's curious, so he figures he'll stay and listen. "No, Sam. It's been two years! You abandoned her, and her stepbrother had to go out and get her to come home because she wouldn't talk to her mother. You have no more rights to her, and that's final!" He slams the receiver down, and Billy hurries to get past him.

---

On the beach during evenings in California, Billy learns more valuable life lessons than anything his dad has ever taught him.

1. He learns how to touch women. He learns how to touch *men*. He learns how to speak, how to make his voice deeper, make it a sultry drawl, make it eager. He doesn't need any help to make it yearning.
2. He learns that a flirty remark can lead to a kiss, and a kiss can lead to a few moments of happiness, and sex can lead to a safe (*safer*) place to hide out when his dad hasn't yet found something he's done wrong but is in the state where he's eager to lash out.
3. Whispered with a giggle over a bonfire Billy learns that kindness is supposed to be payed back. That when someone does something for you, they want to be rewarded.
4. Billy learns that sex is a currency, an act, a way of exchanging services, and Billy learns that the body his dad has made sure he's got is worth a million.

And with a start, Billy realises that he hasn't ever payed Miss Adams back for anything she's done. She's been a better stand-in for his mother than Susan ever could be, but she isn't, she isn't his mum, and she's not even that much older than him, she's not even forty yet, and Billy remembers the deal they'd struck. But it's not like he's been holding up his end of it, he'd even embarrassed her in front of her friends in the academy, so perhaps now, now that Billy's older, *hotter*, not a little kid anymore, perhaps now she wants the reward she's been due. And he can't pay her with money; Billy's saving as much as he can so he'll be able to get out, and then he's saving for his own cello, because he can't keep playing on Miss Adams' as an adult. She's talked to him about how every cello sounds different, how she hopes he'll get his own when he moves out from his parents, how he will have to go around and try each one out until he finds the right one for him, *the perfect fit*. She talks about it as though soulmates exist.

So on their next session, Billy prepares himself. He's packed condoms in his backpack, in case she wants it to go that far, because Billy will do whatever she wants. It's what he owes her, what she deserves.

And so, at the end, when she's reaching out to take the cello from him as Billy holds it out to her, he goes to stand with her. She's tall, but not a giant of a woman like Susan, so Billy still ends up an inch or so taller. He puts his own hand over hers on the neck of the cello, and leans in.

Miss Adams steps back as though he's struck her. Her eyes are wide, horrified, as she looks at him, the hand not on the cello trembling in front of her lips, where Billy'd almost kissed her.

He realises he's gravely miscalculated.

Billy backs away, his knees hitting the chair he'd been sitting on so he falls back down, before pushing himself up again and reaching for his backpack, running out of the classroom and leaving Miss Adams staring after him.

He avoids her for the rest of the week, and then spends another week ignoring going to play with her, a week that begins with Max staring suspiciously at him as they walk back from school and asking "Why is a teacher in my school asking about you?", a question Billy refuses to answer. The week ends with them getting home on Friday, to the sight of both Susan and his dad's cars in the driveway, and an unfamiliar one parked next to the sidewalk.

Billy's apprehensive, and he can tell Max is confused. He keeps one hand on Max' shoulder as they step inside.

Susan's crying on the couch, Neil next to her with his arm around her waist, a man and woman sitting in the armchairs across from them.

“Kids,” Neil says as they come inside the room. “These two fine people would like to talk to you two about what goes on at home.”

Billy feels like he’s swallowed a stone, and it’s slowly sinking down through his throat to land heavy at the bottom of his stomach.

The woman follows Billy to his room, the man going with Max.

Billy sits down at the edge of his bed, and she closes the door behind them, taking his desk chair to place it in front of him, where she sits down and holds out her hand for him to shake. “Billy, is it? I’m Patricia.”

Billy shakes it, and leans back. He knows who these people are, what they’re here to do, and suddenly Billy’s glad he never told Max about his dad. Because Billy’s heard people at school talk, has heard about the system, and the horrors that can happen there, and Billy’s not interested. Better the Devil you know, than the Devil you don’t.

He’s a good liar, he’s had to be, he’s lied since he was seven, but it helps that Patricia takes one look at the size of Billy’s arms, at the weights in the corner of his bedroom, and Billy sees it as she decides in her head that *No, no way. Not this kid.*

Afterwards, when Neil and Susan are out saying goodbye and thanking them for what they do to help vulnerable children, Max comes out of her room and stands next to him in the corridor, far away that the people at the door can’t hear them.

“Who were they?”

“CPS.”

“What’s that?” Max asks, because she’s twelve and she’s never had to deal with shit like this before.

“Child protection services,” Billy says, a knot forming in the back of his throat that’s hard to swallow past.

“Who needs protecting?”

*I will.* “No one, shitbird. They were wrong.”

But then on Saturday, Susan takes Max out for some Girl Time, going to the mall and the beach and buying ice cream, and for the first time ever Neil takes off his belt and uses it to strike Billy.

---

Billy goes back to Miss Adams on Wednesday.

“We have to talk about it.”

“Why?”

“Billy.” She sighs. “You tried to kiss-“

“Did you send CPS to my house?”

At first she doesn’t answer. She just sits there, across from him, tight lipped and searching. “I thought about what you told me about your dad. Back when we first meet. That he didn’t think it would be *manly* for you to play. And then, that him and his girlfriends wouldn’t let you sleep in peace, and I thought-“

“You thought they’d make me *join them?*” Billy feels ready to vomit just at the thought. “You thought that *Susan* would *force me to have sex with her?* My dad’s not fucking perverted!” *He’d probably like to argue that I am, though.*

“I don’t know! I was worried, because someone must have taught you that, must have made you think it was okay, must have made you *do something.*”

“No... No. No one’s ever... done anything.”

“Why are you lying to me?” She looks heartbroken.

“I just thought you’d want it!”

“Why?” Her eyes are growing wet, and Billy’s so scared she’s going to start crying. He’s got two welts on his lower back, and they sting.

“Because- Because the others, my friends, they- they said you do that, you have to pay back, and I’ve never payed you back for anything, and you’ve done so much-“ *you don’t even know how much.* He stops himself before he can say anymore. He’s crying. Billy hasn’t cried in front of someone else since he was seven. “*I’m sorry.*”

Miss Adams stands up, going over to him and putting her arms around Billy. He throws his arms around her waists and presses his face into her belly, not caring that he’s fifteen and not ten anymore.

---

Living with Neil is always bad, but it isn’t always physically painful. Sometimes, it’s just confusing. Sometimes, it just makes Billy feel bad.

Billy almost hates that more, because at least when Neil hits him, he’ll know what to expect, what to do to make himself feel better. He’s learned how to catalogue his injuries and what to steal from the

pharmacy and the way he has to change the way he sleeps for a couple nights in order to not press on a bruise or another.

But when Neil does that other stuff, like when he'll make Billy be in charge of Max to the extent that Billy thinks she's starting to hate him. When he'll berate him for not having bought groceries after school, even though no one told him to, or they gave him too little money to match the list with everything he was to come back with.

Then there are times when Neil surprises him. When he takes him to practice driving, and even has Susan do it sometimes, and then, when Billy turns sixteen, Neil gets him a car.

A blue Camaro. It's old, and slightly beat up, but Billy spends the summer getting it fixed up.

And then the new rules come. Because now he has a car, and that means that he's going to be picking Max up every day after school, he's going to drive the two of them, and he's going to be a good big brother and drive her wherever she wants. And Max, of course, loves it.

She loves getting to boss Billy around, but if he's honest, Billy's starting to detest her for it, even though he knows it isn't really her fault. Isn't her fault the same way it isn't Billy's when Max gets angry because Neil tells him to do something, like pick her up early, or not driver her somewhere she wants to go. Neil's clever, and he's made sure Billy acts as a shield between him and Max' wrath. If Max thinks Billy's an asshole, then she won't have a reason to hate Neil, won't have a reason to turn on him and choose Billy if the time ever comes.

Billy's not certain when it went from 'dad' to 'Neil'.

---

"Listen, I know it didn't... go that well, at the end there, when I took you to audition at the academy," Miss Adams says. Billy's just turned sixteen a couple weeks ago, and he's a junior now. Max is on her last year of middle school. "But you liked it, didn't you? Performing?"

"Yeah," Billy says, curious what her knew crazy idea will be.

"Well, I've got an old friend, from back when I played in an orchestra. He's in charge of it now, and they have a concert in a couple weeks. You think you'd want to participate?"

"I-“ Yes. “I don’t know the songs.”

Miss Adams laughs. "Like you'll need more than a week to learn them. But no, they've been practising all summer and don't really need another cellist, so they're only going to spend the coming weeks practicing, but I was thinking we could ask if they would like to learn one more piece. And you could just take part in that one. What do you say?"

"I don’t-“ *What if Neil finds out?*

“Please, Billy. I want you to experience it, the euphoria of performing on stage. Of being in synch with an orchestra, with spotlights shining down on you.”

It sounds magical, and Billy’s learned to trust Miss Adams when she speaks like that. “Yeah, okay. Yeah, I’d like that.”

“Great!” She leans back on her chair, crossing her legs at the ankles. “Because I might have already talked to him and we’ve got a piece in mind. But, I’m warning you. It’s a long one, three parts. And Jeremy will want to hear you play first. We’ve got a week before he comes to listen!”

She hands him the sheet music, and puts the recording on, and Billy plays. It turns out she’s found him a piece where he’ll be the center, the orchestra playing around him while he has solos, and Billy is amazed at her belief in him.

“Miss Adams?” Billy asks, at the end of the lesson as they’re putting the cello away and he’s unscrewing the bow. “Where is the concert?”

And she tells him it’s in the same city as his upcoming basketball game, the one they’re going away for the weekend to attend, and Billy grins. He won’t have to make up a new excuse for Neil, because Neil’s happy Billy’s playing basketball and is doing well in it, too.

Miss Adams’ friend, Jeremy, comes over during Billy’s next Monday lesson.

Billy's nervous, of course he is, it feels like the audition all over again, but he closes his eyes and listens to Miss Adams recording and plays along. Perfectly.

"Well, I'll be damned. I know you told me he could handle it, that I should just have the orchestra practicing, but the conductor was doubtful. He told me I should tell you that William here should be practicing *with* the orchestra, that they need to make sure they can stay in tune and work well together, but I'm glad to say I think this might just work. We'll have them run it through once before the concert starts, but if you continue like this I can't see it going any other way than without a hitch." He taps Billy on the shoulder on his way out. "You're a great cellist, kid. Pity your old man won't let you do this for real."

Finally, the day of the concert comes. Miss Adams had lenses him a suit, and Billy had been careful packing it in the small suitcase he's taking with him on the bus. He sits next to his teammates and fools around and laughs throughout the hour and a half it takes them to arrive, but he'd be lying if he said he's not agonising slightly over the amount of wrinkles there'll be on the suit. He won't look as pristine as everyone else there. He's never told Miss Adams about that, though, about those worries, because she's never seemed to share them, her only focus being on Billy's ability to play.

They spend the day practicing for the game, before they're told to hit the showers and let loose in the city to find someplace to eat.

Billy'd packed a few sandwiches, knowing he wouldn't have time to find anything better and too nervous to keep much down anyway. He eats them on the way to the Concert Hall, where Miss Adams' cello is

supposed to be waiting for him, Jeremy having picked it up the day before. Miss Adams' going to be there, had shown Billy her front row ticket, but she's not getting there until later, and Billy probably won't see her until after the concert when he's giving her back the cello.

He's stopped at the stage entrance. He'd felt glances in him from the receptionist the second he stepped inside, but now there's a hand on his shoulder and a security guard telling him that he can't get in there, because it's only for the performers.

"I am performing," Billy says, hating how small his voice sounds. He shouldn't sound like that, he's taller, older, broader than when he tried out at the academy, a baby moustache growing above his top lip. And he's made an attempt to smooth down his hair, had made it fluffy but controlled, had tied it back into a tiny ponytail, had even taken off his earring. But he's still got his mum's ring, his mum's necklace, and he hadn't been able to change back at the motel, not among his teammates, the suit folded in the bag Billy clutches.

The guard looks like he's only going to entertain the idea of Billy performing with a classical orchestra for his own amusement. "Where's your instrument, then?"

"It's already inside."

The man scoffs. "Spare me the lies, kid. How old are you, anyway? The people performing here are at least five years older than you. I don't know what kind of trouble you were planning on wrecking, but the rock shows not happening here, so you can take those filthy shoes off from the carpet that Jenny just vacuumed, and get your ass back down to the doors."

Billy's about to protest, when the stage door behind him opens, and Jeremy steps out.

"William! There you are, god, I was about to go looking for you, we thought you got lost."

Billy takes a second to relish in the guard's shocked stare, before he's being ushered in through the door by Jeremy.

He's lead down to a changing room, filled with cello and violin cases. "You can change later, but now we need to get up there so you can run through it with the orchestra." There's only one case left closed, and Billy rushes to it, recognising it as Miss Adams'.

He hurries opening the case, putting his bag behind it, and takes the cello out in less than a minute. He's then lead through cramped pathways, the walls so close together Billy has to manoeuvre to get the cello through without losing his grip, and then, they emerge behind the stage. There's old props there, and layers of curtain hanging from the ceiling. It's dark there, and Billy has to continuously watch where he's going not to trip over something.

Jeremy takes him with it past them, going on the side of the stage, and when the spotlights first hit him, Billy has to blink to adjust to the bright light.

"Finally!" the conductor says, a tall bespectacled man with silver hair. The orchestra's spread out in a half circle in front of him, one

empty chair left for Billy. At least the guard had been correct about everyone's ages. Billy's the youngest one here.

"He got held up by the guard at the door," Jeremy explains as Billy goes to sit down.

"Yes, I imagine he would've been." He sends a critical eye Billy's way, although somehow filled with less contempt than the guard had.  
"I suppose you haven't had time to tune it yet?"

"No, sir," Billy says.

"Well, hurry up and do it, then. I need to see if you're good enough for this to work."

Billy's quick and efficient as he tunes it, the members of the orchestra taking the moment to check their sheet music, to small talk between each other.

Miss Adams has had him practise understanding a conductor's moves, so Billy knows exactly what to do. All three pieces end up being a combined time of over twenty minutes, and by the end of it, the concert hall is so quiet he thinks he'd be able to hear a pin drop.

"You didn't use any sheet music?" The conductor asks.

"No, sir. I don't need it."

For the first time, Billy sees the hint of a smile on the old man's lips. *Approval.* "Jeremy, get this music stand out of the way. The boy doesn't need it."

They end up having a break after that, until the concert starts. Billy takes the time to curl up and do some homework, going through the coach's play for the game tomorrow, until it's half an hour left until the concert starts and Billy steps into a bathroom to change. He's shown to a chair behind the stage, where he's told to sit until it's time for Haydn's *Cello Concerto No. 1*. He's not allowed to move around, so Billy spends the time leaning back and listening to the music, eyes closed as lets the smooth notes carry him away as though in a dream, and then he obsesses over smoothing his suit down. At least he looks the part, or as much as Billy Hargrove ever will. He's got a borrowed suit, and a borrowed cello, but his talent and refined ability is all his.

The lights dim, right before Billy's about to enter the stage, Miss Adams' cello having been left next to his chair for easy access. Billy loves attention when he's doing something he's good at, but there's over a thousand people in the audience and that's much, much more than have ever attended Billy's basketball games. Billy's pretty glad he can't really make out the audience as anything other than a sea of vaguely defined people when the spotlights turn on, particularly since the strongest one lands on him, the guest principal player.

As he plays, Billy finds that what Miss Adams said is true. He's filled with exhilaration, butterflies flying around his belly instead of the stone Billy carries most days. It's the same feeling as when he's on the court, but better, because whereas Billy's aggressive on the court, here, on stage, he's emotional in a way he can never really let himself be.

And when the concert's over, and Billy stands with the others to the sound of the audience's applause, he thinks that this must be the best feeling in the whole world.

He never wants it to stop.

As he goes to pack the cello away, he's met with smiles and compliments and congratulations from the members of the orchestra, and they don't stop when Billy gets out, when he gets out from the stage door to see the guard from before gaping at him, he's immediately bombarded with compliments from those who recognise him, and for the first time, Billy's glad he stands out among people like these. They're amazed at his age, and Billy has to basically wade through compliments until he gets to Miss Adams.

She's standing close to the entrance, smiling the widest smile Billy's ever seen, and she's holding a bouquet out to him.

"It's common to buy flowers for the performers," she explains. "I know you can't take them with you, but we could keep them in the classroom. And you deserved to get them. You were amazing."

"Thank you," Billy says and hugs her.

"You hungry? Want to go and eat something. My treat, you deserve that too," she says with a laugh once Billy's stepped back.

"Sounds great," Billy says, and it is, it's the best weekend he's had,

and when he comes home and Neil asks him why he's smiling, Billy can say they won the game, and it won't be a lie.

---

Of course, shit hits the fan. *Of course* it does.

Billy hadn't ever thought to think that Max might have classmates whose parents would drag them to two hour long concerts.

But well, she has, and Max shows up after school on Monday, while Billy's helping Susan put away the groceries, *Serenade For Strings* a low hum on the radio, and places a cutout of a newspaper on the kitchen table.

"Is this *you*?" she asks, eyes wide and incredulous. "One of my classmates parents like classical music, and she thought she recognised you. Since when do you play the *cello*? Since when are you *good* at it?"

"Max—" Billy starts, horror dawning at what's about to happen, what's about to come to light.

Susan steps up to the table, lifting up the torn piece of newspaper, her mouth falling open in shock. She puts a hand on his shoulder. It

feels like he's Atlas and she's pressing down the weight of the world on him. "Oh Billy! How wonderful! Why didn't you tell us, we would have loved to-"

"Why didn't Billy tell you what?" Neil asks, stepping into the kitchen.

"Neil! Billy plays-

"No!" Billy shouts, attempting to rush forward and grab the paper. He's ready to eat it, if so be.

But Neil's already taken it from Susan, and Billy can see it on his face as he realises what he's looking at.

He braces himself for it, wishes he was anywhere but here, wishes Max would just disappear.

And Neil's there in a second, backhanding him so hard Billy stumbles to the side and has to catch himself on the kitchen chair.

Distantly, he hears Max scream, but his ears are ringing.

"You lying little fag!" Neil shouts, and Billy has the air fly out of him as Neil punches his stomach.

He thinks Max is crying.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, dad, I’m sorry-“

“Stop your blubbering,” Neil’s says, slapping him across the cheek again. He pulls Billy up the the neck of his shirt, lowering his voice so that only Billy will hear. “You can count yourself lucky Susan and Max are here, or you’d be getting much worse than this.”

Later, that evening, Billy and Max will hear Susan and Neil talk about moving away, as Max wraps a piece of frozen peas in a towel so Billy can press it against his swollen cheek. Susan will sound unsure, but then Neil will remind her that Sam’s calls are getting more frequent, and she will agree.

“I’m sorry,” Max will sob, and Billy won’t say anything.

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They’re told to pack their things immediately, starting on Tuesday, Neil confiscating the keys to the Camaro and having Susan pick both him and Max up every day after school. Billy knows it’s only so that Billy doesn’t have anywhere to run off to, doesn’t have the ability to go to his lessons. Neil still doesn’t know who’s been teaching him, and Billy’s glad for that at least.

But on Thursday, on the way home, he asks Susan if they can perhaps be allowed to walk home after school, because they're moving on Monday, and Billy at least owes telling his teacher he won't be coming back. Susan is reluctant, wary, but she does agree.

"For the record, I would have loved to hear you play, Billy," she says, and Billy still doesn't know if he hates her or not.

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He makes up some bullshit about how Neil and Susan had been planning a move for a while, and had just told him and Max it was happening this Monday, because they'd just found a house to buy.

Billy can't stop himself from crying as he says it, as he admits he doesn't know how he'll be able to continue playing. Miss Adams hugs him, and she reassured him his new school will also have a music room of some sort. She even writes him a letter, to give to whoever's in charge, explaining his situation and the arrangement they've had going for the past nine years.

When he gets home that night, exhausted for no real reason, he expects Max to be there. What he doesn't expect is to find a note she's written, taped to his door, telling him she's getting on a bus to her dad's, and asking him to get in the Camaro and follow after her, to come and stay with her and Sam Mayfield.

For a second, Billy can't breathe, feels ready to pass out. He wants to scream, wants to hit something, wants to cry. Wants to let his emotions out by playing cello.

Instead, he grabs the note and turns on his heel and runs into the kitchen, digging through the drawer Neil stuffed his keys in, and having found them, he's out the door in less than a minute, throwing himself into his car and speeding down the road to catch up with Max.

He knows which bus station she's likely to end up at, and it sounded like she might wait for him, a little while at least.

His hands tremble on the wheel the whole way there, and he slams the Camaro's door shut as he finally parks and exits. It's a big station, one of those with an actual house for people to sit in while they wait, one with busses going all the way across California from.

And Billy finds Max, sitting in a plastic chair with a big gym bag at her feet, her backpack slung over one shoulder.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?!" He almost shouts the words at her, Max' eyes immediately widening. Her mouth sets into a thin line.

"I'm staying with my dad. I'm not moving away to *Hawkins, Indiana*."

“Yes, yes you are. Max, he’s going to *kill me* unless you do,” he hisses the words at her.

“You can stay with us, Billy. With me and my dad.”

“I don’t know your dad, Max. And he doesn’t know me. He doesn’t care about me, why would he? It won’t work; I’m nothing to your dad.”

Max pushes herself up to standing. “*Well, you’re something to me!* You’re my stupid, asshole of a big brother, and—“

“Maxie?” They both turn around to see find a dark haired man running up to them. Max rushes up to him and throws her arms around him, burying her face in his chest with a chocked “*Dad!*”

Her father strokes her hair, eyes landing on Billy and frowning. He seems to have heard the last bit of what Max said, though, because Billy can see it click in his head when he comes to the conclusion of who Billy must be.

“Oh, Max, what are you doing here? I called your mum after you called me, and she’s beside herself with worry. I was going to drive you home, but since- Billy? Yeah? - is already here...”

Billy sees her arms tighten around him. “I want to stay with you. You’re my dad, not- not Neil, and—“

“Sweetheart,” he sounds so sad as he says it, as though he misses her, too. Billy turns the ring his mum left him around on his finger. “My little Mad Max. You can’t. You’ll get to visit me during the summer, okay? You’ll probably get friends in Indiana, but you could come over for a week or so? I’d take you to see the Hollywood sign.”

“Okay,” Max’ words are muffled against his shirt.

“Yeah? Okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. Go, then. So your brother can take you home.”

She doesn’t want to, Billy can see she doesn’t, so it probably shouldn’t surprise him that the only way she manages to let go off her dad is by unwrapping her arms and going a different extreme, running to Billy and almost knocking the air out him from how hard she hits him. She clutches at his waist now, not looking up as her dad leaves.

Sam smiles sadly at them. “Take care of my daughter, alright, kid? Don’t let her get into any trouble, as we both know she’s obviously capable off.” He laughs as he says it, but his words hit Billy with almost as much force as Max’ hug. The cling to him, making it hard to breathe. “I want her whole by the time she gets back to me this summer.”

“Yes, sir.”

They stay there standing, him and Max, until Billy’s seen Sam get lost in the crowd around them, and only then, does he start to walk, signalling to Max she can let go. Billy takes her gym bag and leads her back to the Camaro.

They don’t speak, the whole ride home, and by the time Billy pulls up to the house, the sun’s just starting to set, painting the sky red and pink and yellow. Through some sort of a miracle, Neil’s not home yet.

But Susan is, and she opens the front door before Billy’s even out of the Camaro. She rushes down the steps to Max, pulling her to her and holding her tightly.

“Sam called,” she says, staring up at Billy. “I thought he’d- Oh, Billy, thank you.” And for the first time, Billy finds himself being dragged into a group hug, a hug *Susan’s* initiating. It’s awkward, Billy stiff as a board. Neil’s making him leave his surfboard behind, no use for it in Indiana, after all.

“Where’s my dad?” Billy asks once he’s allowed to step back. “His car isn’t here yet.”

“He needed to see to some things about the house, the last little details before the move. He’s bringing home pizza,” she says the last bit to Max, as though the promise of pizza will make her unlearn what horrible person her stepdad is.

Billy glances in the direction of the beach. “He won’t be back for a while? Not until tonight?”

“No,” Susan agrees.

“Can I go with Max to the beach? Just an hour, at most, before it gets dark. Just one last time.”

Max looks up at her mother. “Please, mum?”

“Yeah,” Susan nods, and Billy wonders if his life perhaps wouldn’t have been so bad with one of Max’ parents, if Neil was out of the picture. “I can’t see why not.”

So quickly, they go into the house and change into their swimwear. They run down to the beach, Billy having put the keys to the Camaro back in the drawer in the kitchen, and into the water, swimming until the last rays of the sun disappear behind the water.

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“You’re a good driver, aren’t you, Billy?” Neil asks around noon on Monday. Since he woke up, Billy’s spent the day carrying boxes over

to his or Neil's or Susan's car, and they're finally finished. He thinks Susan's at the bathroom, Max probably busy saying goodbye to her childhood home, and Billy's leaning back against the side of the Camaro. Awaiting instructions.

He looks over at Neil with raised eyebrows. "Yes, sir."

"Mm. I've seen the way you drive one handed, cigarette held lazily out the window. Well." Neil breathes in, and comes closer to Billy, stopping next to the open door to driver's seat of the Camaro. "Put your hand there, Billy. Let me see those musician's hands of yours." He nods at the space where the door would meet the rest of the car, if it was closed, and Billy feels the bottom of his stomach go out and disappear.

He has to swallow before speaking. "Dad?"

"Do it, Billy."

He feels like he might pass out, but Billy lifts his hand, the right one. It's shaking, and Billy can't bring himself to move it more than a couple inches from his body.

Neil does it for him. He reaches out, grasps Billy's hand at the wrist, hard enough to bruise, and forces it down to the car, holding it there as he slams the car door closed on it. There's a crack, and Billy feels something break, letting out a scream and falling to his knees on the gravel as soon as Neil lets go off him.

“There’s not a chance in hell you’re playing any more music,” Neil spits, and leaves him there. “Get in the car, Maxine!” And Billy realises Max is there, that she’s probably seen the whole thing.

Tears of shame burn behind his eyes, blurring his vision, and with his whole body trembling Billy gently moves his hand away from the spaces between the car. He can’t see what it looks like, can’t make out more than a red line spreading from his palm, but he’s certain something’s broken. He brings it to his chest, holding it there, and doesn’t move until he’s breathed past the nausea and is sure he won’t throw up.

When he does stand, his legs are shaking, and he more or less falls into the driver’s seat of the Camaro.

Max is looking at him with eyes as wide as saucers. “Billy-“ she starts, her voice trembling.

Billy sets his jaw, holds up his left hand to stop her. “Not a fucking word, Max.”

Susan gets out of the house a minute later, and with that, Billy pulls off, his left hand trembling in his lap, Neil in his car in front of him and Susan in hers behind the Camaro. Off to Hawkins, then. Off to Hell.

## **2. Chapter 2**

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Hey guys! It took me a couple weeks, but here's the next chapter!

Writing this and skipping through the season to Max and/or Billy scenes, I just realised that Max never hangs out at the boys' places until the last two episodes, so how the fuck did Billy know where to go looking for her?

#### **TRIGGER WARNING:**

Child abuse, f-slur, references to rape and child sexual abuse (Billy's got some fucked up ideas of what's going on at the Byers place based on the limited information he's given. There is no actual sexual abuse taking place).

#### **Disclaimer:**

I've mixed a lot of dialogue from the show with my own.

Billy hasn't ever spent so much time behind the wheel as he does during those three days it takes them to get to Hawkins. 32 hours in total.

Max manages to keep her trap shut for three whole hours, all up until the point where they reach the sign that says "***Now Leaving California - Hope We'll See You Soon Again!***" and Billy has to swallow to keep a sob down. His right hand aches in his lap, but his tears have dried on his cheeks, and he doesn't need new ones joining them.

Billy's never been outside California. When they arrive in Hawkins, he'll have been in eight additional states. If this was a road trip, and not a punishment, he might've had fun visiting these places.

"Give me your hand," Max says, and it's so similar to what Neil said he doesn't really manage to suppress the shudder that goes through him. Max must notice, because she hurries to explain, "I saw mum put some ice in the box with our drinks, to keep them cool. I could wrap it in a t-shirt and put it on your hand."

He thinks about it for a moment, eyes still on the road, and tries to flex his fingers. Sharp pain shoots through his whole hand and up his arm and makes him hiss.

He hasn't dared look down at it, afraid of what he'll see, afraid it'll make him loose control of the car and crash. Ideally he'd crash into Neil in the car in front of him and the two of them would both go up in flames, but Max is in the car with him and Billy doesn't want her to die. He knows that's the reason why the driving setup is as it is. Neil in front, leading the family, Susan in the back, keeping up the rear. Crowding him in. Max beside him so he doesn't think of running away. Billy doesn't doubt it for a minute that Neil would make a case of kidnapping if Billy did dare try to drive away with her.

He feels her eyes trained on him, and gives her a small nod. She leans in between their seats to rummage around in the backseat, and Billy holds his hand out to her when she's done. His hand must look bad though, because Max gasps, and looks back up at him.

"Billy..." she says, tentative. Afraid.

"Shut up, Maxine," he says, quickly. He doesn't want to know.

He can't help the little hitch in his breath when she touches him. She's trying to be careful, he can tell, but any movement hurts.

She moves further up to his arm, trying to pull it a little closer to her, and wraps his hand in the shirt, the ice making it throb. Her hands are so much smaller than his, and god, she is so young.

She shouldn't have had to see. She shouldn't have seen Neil slam the door shut on his hand, shouldn't have seen Billy collapse on the ground and try to heave. Everything is wrong, everything has shifted, and Billy doesn't know what to do.

What Billy's dad does to him has always been Billy's secret, and maybe Susan's, too. Something Max wasn't to know about.

She shouldn't have found out. She shouldn't have been abandoned by her dad and then forced to move cross country with an asshole of a stepfather, and a weak little mother who doesn't say anything, doesn't ever fucking do anything.

Maybe Neil will start hitting her too, now. Both Susan and Max. Billy doesn't know if Susan would leave, if he did. He doesn't trust her to leave. But the spell is broken now, Max knows what punishments can be expected for stepping out of line, and that means that Billy's going to have to work even harder to keep her out of trouble. Billy was born into this bullshit, he's known it his whole life, but Max hasn't, Max doesn't know how to operate under these conditions, Max didn't deserve this. It's not her fault her mother has shitty taste in men.

If she'd only kept out of his fucking business. If she had used her goddamn brain to figure out that showing that newspaper in the kitchen, where everyone could hear them, was a stupid thing to do, if only her classmate hadn't gone to the concert, if only they hadn't recognised him, if only Max had talked to him privately, if only she hadn't gotten him hurt, made him lose the one thing that made him feel at peace, if only she hadn't been such a stupid, blind *fucking* child.

He rips his hand out of hers, even if it hurts, lays it on top of the wheel while reaching out with the other to turn the radio on.

Max doesn't say anything, and Billy doesn't look at her. They do a good job ignoring each other for two people stuck in the same limited space for hours. Max reads her comics, Billy drives and listens to music.

Three hours later and Neil signals with his lights that they're going to be pulling off, and Billy does the same for Susan, even though he kind of just wants to not let her know and see if she'll just continue up the road by herself. But Neil would probably drag him to the back of the diner and slap him if he did, so he doesn't.

It's a dingy little diner on the side of the road in Arizona. Max only talks to her mum, and Billy doesn't talk at all. He asks for a burger and fries, something he'll be able to eat one handed, and Neil doesn't say anything but Billy sees his eyes shift down to the t-shirt Billy's hand is wrapped in.

Max doesn't say anything as they get back into Camaro, and she

doesn't say anything as the clock nears midnight and they come to park outside an equally as dingy little motel, this time in New Mexico. Neil gets them a room with a double bed for him and Susan - 'Because it should be sin for a man to not sleep next to his wife when they've spent all day separated'. Billy idly wonders if Susan might've enjoyed they almost twelve hours she's got without her husband - and one with two singles for him and Max. He realises that this is probably the longest they've been forced to spend time together since that honeymoon weekend their parents fucked off on when they first got married. Max doesn't speak, Billy doesn't speak, they take turns changing in the bathroom and when they sleep, they turn on their sides so they're facing away from each other.

Max seems to have gotten over whatever reservations she's had by the next morning though, because one hour in Billy feels her eyes on him once more.

"What is it, shitbird?"

"What if we left?" she asks, and Billy turns his gaze away from the road for a moment because what the fuck is she on about now?

He doesn't answer, he just raises his eyebrows, and Max must get the hint, because she sighs. Loudly. As if she's the one with any right to be annoyed. As if she thinks he's being obtuse on purpose.

"We could turn around. Go back home. Or we could- We could just... We could go to a hospital. Tell them what happened, what Neil did, and-"

He starts laughing. He can't help it. How can she be so fucking stupid?

“Please, Billy. Your hand, it looks... it looks really bad.”

Billy feels a knot form in his throat, feels like a stone has sunk into his stomach, because he knows, he knows, he looked at it this morning before wrapping his hand back up in the shirt just so he wouldn't accidentally see it, but he can't think about that, can't think about how much it hurts or how worried he is that he won't ever be able to play again, so instead he sets his jaw and nods.

“Yeah. And whose fault is that?” he hisses between clenched teeth.

He doesn't look at her, but he feels her deflate beside him, feels her lean away. As though he's struck her. Billy wouldn't. He never would. He might scare her and push her around but he'd never hit her. For a moment he feels almost guilty, but then he thinks that it's her fault they're here, that this is happening to them, and then he just feels tired.

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New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma, diner, Kansas, Missouri, motel.

By the time night has fallen once more and they've parked outside a motel in Missouri, Billy - and Max, because she doesn't have a choice short of stuffing her fingers in her ears - has listened to *Kill 'Em All* eight times and is on the seventh run through of *Ride the Lightning*.

Max disappears with her mum to go buy them drinks from the vending machine. Billy's sitting on the edge of his bed when the door opens and she steps inside.

He's playing with his lighter, considering if it's worth it to go outside for a smoke or if he should just go to sleep, when a can of coke appears in front of him.

"Here," Max says, and Billy only looks up because her voice sounds just shy of wobbling.

She pushes the coke into his chest, and Billy grabs it before it can fall down into his lap when she lets go. Then there's a new t-shirt, fresh ice weighing it down, held out to him. Her hair's hanging in her face, so Billy can't be sure, but he thinks her eyes are red-rimmed. It almost stops him from saying what he's about to.

But he glances at the ice, and he feels something bitter rear its ugly head, and he thinks that Max must have talked to her mum, but that doesn't help now, does it? It's too little too late.

"Fuck you, Maxine," he says, but there's no real heat to it. He just sounds exhausted.

Max nods. “Yeah, alright,” she says, and dumps the shirt and ice on the bed beside him. She turns around, grabs her pyjamas, and crosses the room into the bathroom. Billy hears the shower turn on a minute later.

He doesn’t drink the coke.

But he does change into sweatpants and a t-shirt, and then he wraps his hand in ice, wincing at the cold. He turns the light off before lying down in bed, but leaves the lamp by Max’ nightstand on.

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Missouri leads to Illinois, and Max seems to have got it in her head to try speaking to him as they’re crossing state lines. Getting a little closer to their new Hell for every mile.

“I don’t get why you wouldn’t go with me and my dad,” she says sullenly. Billy imagines that if he were to look over at her, then she would be sitting with her arms crossed, pouting.

“Are you fucking with me, Max, or are you just that stupid?”

“I’m not-!” she protests.

“Oh? You’re not? Then what the fuck?”

“I just... We could’ve stayed with him. We could’ve moved in with him, and we could’ve lived in L.A. and you could’ve gone out and listened to your stupid bands in the evenings and everything—everything would’ve been good, and fine, and—“ Billy has to admit that all of that sounds amazing and great, but he can’t indulge those dreams, because that’s just what they are. Dreams. Fantasies. They’re not grounded in any sort of reality. “And I just don’t get why you had to force me back?!”

“I already told you why! Your dad doesn’t know me, your mum wanted you back, and my dad would have fucking killed me if I let you get away. What is it that you don’t get?!”

“He wouldn’t- He wouldn’t have *killed* you. You’re his- He’s your dad!”

Billy scoffs, feels like laughing. His hand, the left one, the uninjured one, clenches the wheel. “I’m going to say this once, okay? Only once. My mum left because my dad wouldn’t stop hitting her. With her gone, he started in on me. He’s been hitting me for a decade. Alright? So don’t try to tell me what he would and wouldn’t do. I know Neil better than you do, Max.”

It’s silent for so long Billy figures he’s left her speechless.

“Why didn’t she take you with her?” Max then asks, and she just

sounds curious. Confused. *You and me both, shitbird.*

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Billy has to blink back the tears that start to well up. “I don’t know,” he whispers. “She didn’t say.”

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“Well, would you look at that,” Billy says once they’ve driven past the seventh farm in the span of half an hour. “We really are in hick town, huh.”

Max doesn’t say anything.

“Five bucks a tornado appears and sweeps us off the road?”

“It won’t. There would’ve been a warning. Or something.”

Billy tilts his head to the side. “One can hope.”

Max sighs. “Yeah.”

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Their new house is a shitty little building on a shitty little street. It's got a garden, although it isn't much and there's no bushes or flowers planted there yet. The other houses are equally shitty, if somewhat more dilapidated looking. There's barren trees, and hedges left to grow until they're wild, surrounding some of the houses.

Billy imagines Susan's going to end up trying to fix the garden come spring. He imagines she's going to fail, too. Their house in San Diego didn't have any space for a garden, but it was also nicer than this. And it was close to the sea. And close to other houses, with nice neighbours.

Old Cherry Lane looks like the type of place where the neighbours are content to hide behind their curtains and tall hedges if their new neighbour were to decide to beat his son outside in broad daylight.

"The moving truck's coming with our furniture tonight," Neil tells them. He's standing outside the house, nodding up at it, looking satisfied. When Susan goes over to stand beside him, he reaches out and pulls her closer with a hand around her back. She leans her head against his shoulder, and it's such a stereotypical domestic look that Billy feels ready to vomit.

It's late afternoon, and he's just now realising how fucking cold October is in Indiana. It's probably at least ten degrees colder than he's used to, and he's shivering in his t-shirt. He's going to start

having to wear jackets.

*God, it's going to snow here in a couple weeks. Jesus Christ.*

"We'll unpack your car first, Susan. Then you can drive Billy to the hospital while I wait for the truck."

Billy's head snaps up at that. He's leaning against the side of the Camaro, had been busy pushing around a stick left on the ground, but now he turns to stare at Neil. "What?"

Neil turns around to look at him over his shoulder. He raises an eyebrow. "Your hand's broken, is it not? Didn't that box fall on it right before we left, but you didn't want to bother your loving family with petty little problems so you didn't say anything until we arrived?"

Billy opens his mouth to speak, to *agree*, but Max starts babbling before he can.

She steps forward, as though she thinks she can fight Neil. She reminds Billy a bit of a rabid dog at that moment. "That's not what happened! I saw you, you grabbed his hand and."

Billy reaches for her arm and pulls her back before she can get further.

Neil levels her with a look, burning in its intensity. “Now, Maxine. You know that isn’t true and you shouldn’t lie.” His gaze moves up to meet Billy’s instead, although he keeps speaking as though he’s still talking to her. “You know that only bad things can come from lying.”

Max is about to protest, Billy can tell, so he tightens his grip on her wrist and she turns around to glare at him instead, wrenching her arm free and stomping around the Camaro to go pull her backpack out.

It takes them around half an hour to unload Susan’s car. Neil goes over to start going through his own, and Max rushes to the Camaro to start moving her stuff into the room Susan told her would be hers.

Billy moves over and sits down in the passenger seat and waits for Susan to get in. He looks down at his hand, still wrapped in Max’ shirt, and pulls at a loose thread.

The problem, it turns out when Susan gets in, is that neither of them actually know where the hospital is. Susan drives them into town and leaves Billy in the car as she steps into some shop called ‘Melvald’s’. She emerges five minutes later with directions, and twenty more minutes later, they’re parking outside Hawkins Memorial.

Susan wanders off to speak to a triage nurse. It takes half an hour before another nurse shows up to take them to an exam room. It’s the first time Billy’s looked at his hand since the night before when he unwraps it, and his palm is mostly one big bruise. The ice has helped some, but there’s still swelling there. The doctor looks up at him sharply, frowning.

"I hurt it two days ago," Billy explains. "We just moved here, and I dropped a box on it. I didn't think we could just stop on the way so I didn't say anything."

She frowns, and looks over at Susan, but whatever she finds there must be reassuring because she doesn't say anything. Just asks him if he can move his hand at all - he can't. His fingers are numb - and then tells him to change into a hospital gown so they can get him x-rayed.

His hand's broken - shocker - so he ends up needing a cast.

"He plays the—" Susan starts, but Billy interrupts her, saying "basketball," before she can say "cello."

Susan glances at him and sighs, but nods. "How long will he need the cast?"

"Six weeks," the doctor says. "And no basketball." She glances at his arms. "Or weightlifting. You might start trying some light hand exercises in three weeks."

They're then sent on their way, and Billy figures it's only the presence of the guy with the moving truck that makes Neil not tell Billy to help carry in their furniture.

He doesn't have that luck the next day, when Neil has him help move everything around until both he and Susan are satisfied. Susan spends

that Thursday shopping so they're stocked up on food, and once Billy's done moving furniture he's released to fix up his own room. By Friday Max is bored, and so is Billy. Susan convinces Neil to let them drive around town, familiarise themselves with it.

Max discovers they have an Arcade and Billy drops her off there before driving out to the outskirts of Hawkins. He considers going out to some field and sit there smoking, but as soon as he gets close to one and rolls down his window he smells the stench of manure, so he turns around and drives off to the old quarry. It's the closest to the sea Billy's going to get this far inland.

He spends Friday, Saturday, and most of Sunday smoking and blaring music up there. Cries a little, too, although he's loath to admit it, even to himself.

There's some problems with the schools, so they don't actually get to start on Monday. Neil's somehow already managed to find himself a job before they even arrived, although Billy guesses there's always a need for security guards.

Susan is busy going on interviews for a couple different places during the last few days, so she's at home most of the day on Monday. Billy ignores her and stays in his room. He can't be arsed to drive Max to the Arcade again, and Susan doesn't make him, so she spends the day moping in her bedroom.

Tuesday morning arrives, and Billy makes sure to grab his jean jacket. His jeans hug his ass, his mum's jewellery and his earrings glimmer, and he fixes his hair at his makeshift vanity before leaving his room.

Max looks vaguely nauseous as she gets in his car, like she's still debating faking illness to get to stay home one more day.

He's got Scorpions blasting from the Camaro's speakers as he pulls up and parks outside the high school. The middle school's next to it. Max can skate the rest of the way, fuck it.

Still, she looks mildly annoyed as she gets out, but Billy's too busy checking out the school to pay her any attention. It's as bland as everything else here. But there are eyes following him as he throws his cigarette to the ground and stuffs his cast clad hand in his pocket.

He immediately gets the attention of a dark haired, freckled boy, who sticks close to a red headed girl. It's immediately obvious these two are part of the popular crowd, but also that there seems to be a lack of a leader. These are followers, and there's an air of confusion, of uncertainty over all of them, like they don't know exactly what to do with themselves without anyone telling them to.

And Billy's never really been close to the king of the school, before, back at home. He was always a little too volatile, a little too angry, a little too closed off, for any of that. But here? He's the most exciting thing to have appeared in a long while, he can already tell. He's from the other side of the country, from the state of movie stars and beautiful people, and he stands out. He's confident, and fuck, he's bored. He figures playing the role of King for the next year and a half might be fun, if nothing else.

But then it turns out that there is a supposed King, but he's mellowed out during the last year. Billy's always liked a challenge. It might be

more fun to be King if he has to work a little for it, anyway. He doesn't meet the infamous Steve Harrington that day, as he's a senior and Billy's a junior, but he hears about him. By lunch, the student body's started to thrum with a sense of excitement. Impending doom. Like they're waiting for an explosion to go off, a single gunshot to signal the beginning of the civil war. Here comes the usurper, about to fight the fallen king.

Some girl called Tina is handing out flyers for a Halloween party, and she hands it to him with a smirk and bat of eyelashes. Billy grins back, figures he might as well start building himself a reputation so Neil doesn't find out any more of his secrets.

The broken hand's a bit of a flaw in his image, but then Tommy assumes he got it from a fight and by the end of the day, the whole school has probably heard that version of the truth. Billy doesn't say anything. It's surprising how little he has to say for them to all figure out their own versions of who he is. All he needs to do is play into their expectations at this point.

He smokes a cigarette as he waits for Max after school, sitting in his car. She shows up just a few minutes after Billy's sat down, and he waits to finish his cigarette before he drives. He's not gonna waste it, and he's only got one good hand.

"How was it?" he asks her, trying to fill the silence. He can already tell from her body language it wasn't particularly good.

She huffs, crosses her arms. "The science teacher said I came 'all the way from sunny California' to be the 'latest passenger to join them on their curiosity voyage'."

Billy snorts a laugh.

“He made me stand in front of the whole class. And these four guys stared at me as I sat down. And then they stared at me during recess. Goddamn creeps.” She wrinkles her nose, sounds a bit unsure.

Billy bends his cigarette in half before letting it fall to the ground through his window. “They stared at you?” he asks, voice low, as he starts pulling out of the car park. Rock music starts blaring through the speakers again.

“Yeah,” Max says. “But like- I wrote them a note. Called them creeps and told them to stop spying on me.”

Billy lets out a bitter laugh. “You wrote them *a note*? You think that’s going to help? Please, shitbird.”

“What?” she says, turning her head to glare at him. “What else should I have done?”

“Tell me their names and I’ll make sure they don’t mess with you.”

“I don’t need you to scare them away for me. I can handle it. You don’t have to fight my battles.”

“You sure about that?” Billy hisses, thinking back about how he’s taken the fall for her countless times since they met each other.

It seems like he’s hit a nerve, because Max nods, sits up straight. “Yeah. Yeah, I am. I mean, you couldn’t even stand up to your own dad. You... You were too scared to run away with me, or tell someone at the hospital, and when he said you dropped a box on your hand you didn’t say anything, even though we both know that’s not what happened!”

Billy can’t fucking breathe. “Max,” he bites out. “Take that the fuck back, Max.”

“No!” she shouts. “No, you wouldn’t leave when we could, you- You choose to stay, and I’m stuck here too, now, and I don’t need your help! And it’s not like you can fight anyone; your hand’s broken!”

Billy nods, presses his tongue against his teeth. “Get out.”

“What?”

He pulls up to the Arcade. “Out of the fucking car, Max!”

She sets her jaw, but jumps out. Her hand’s still on the door though, and she’s not making a move to close it.

“Go!” Billy shouts at her, pointing out the door. “Go play your stupid

games and don't fucking expect me to help you!"

"What?"

"When one of those little shits pushes their hand up underneath your shirt, don't coming running to me, you hear me, Maxine?" He knows he doesn't mean it, but something seems to twist in her eyes, turning her expression ugly.

"Why do you always have to be such a fucking asshole?! What did I ever do to you?"

"I already told you!" he shouts back, turning around to look through the windshield.

"Eat shit, Billy!"

He starts driving and she slams the door shut. When he glances at the rear-view mirror, he sees her giving him the finger.

Billy laughs, but halfway through it turns into a sob.

---

He wakes up feeling off kilter, like there's an itch beneath his skin he can't quite get to. Like the ocean before it storms. It doesn't get better when Neil squeezes his shoulder and tells him that Susan's planning to watch a horror movie and have some bonding time with Max after school, and to not be late getting her home, because Neil's got his own plans with Susan later that evening that he doesn't want delayed.

Usually, when Billy's feeling like this, he might consider skipping some classes just for time to go faster so he can get to Miss Adams and the cello. Or he might start a fight with someone at school. Or he'd go surfing. Find some boys to kiss behind a cliff.

But none of those options are available. Miss Adams not here, her cello's not here, he can't fight because his hand's in a cast, there's no sea, no waves, and no queer boys in a small town in conservative Indiana.

He skips lunch to go sit in his car, and pulls out the note Miss Adams wrote for the supposed music teacher at Billy's new school. He reads it, reads how she'd explained that Billy's dad didn't like him playing so she's been teaching Billy in secret, but that he's so good now that he doesn't need a teacher. He just needs a cello.

His fist clenches around the paper and it tears, just a little, just in one corner. Billy regrets it as soon as he's done it and tries to smooth out the wrinkles before folding it twice and putting it away in the glove compartment.

Billy knows, that before this day is over, he's going to have done

something stupid.

It turns out it happens when driving him and Max home from school, and not at Tina's Halloween party when he's drunk and halfway to unhinged like Billy might have expected.

He's waiting for her by the Camaro when she comes skating, late, and Billy thinks about Neil's heavy hand holding him in place this morning.

"You're late again," he tells her.

"I had to get catch-up homework," she explains, getting into the passenger side, and Billy pushes himself up to standing.

"Jesus. I don't care. You're late again, and you're skating home. You hear me?" He doesn't know if he means it, though. Neil was always worried about her getting hurt or lost or something when they lived in San Diego, but Hawkins is a small town, so maybe it's fine if she were to skate home.

He gets in and pulls the car out of park. Chances a glance at her. Her arms are crossed again, and she's frowning. "Those boys still bothering you?"

She purses her lips, and Billy looks back out through the windshield. For a second it seems like she won't answer, but then she sighs. "Those stalkers are apparently worried I'm going to get bullied."

Max would punch a bully before she let herself get bullied, Billy knows.

“They like... *assumed*, I would want to hang out with them. Said it was *okay*. That I was *allowed* to go trick or treating with them. But they’re the ones staring at *me*.”

She doesn’t continue, and Billy doesn’t know if she wants him to say anything. He doesn’t want to fight with her, not really. But at the same time, he knows he’s really close to a fucking breakdown, and he just wants to punch something so he doesn’t start crying.

He thinks about the way she’d sounded, when she came over a few minutes ago. Their words had been harsh, but the attitude behind them had been halfhearted, like they’re both too tired to keep the fight from yesterday going.

He turns onto an empty road that continues straight on for a few minutes. They’re halfway home by now. Their new home. The road’s lined with trees, most of the leaves on the ground beneath them. They’re not even a pretty orange colour like they are in paintings and children’s books, they’re brown. Like shit. In San Diego the streets were lined with palm trees.

“God. This place is such a shithole.”

“It’s not that bad,” Max mutters from beside him.

Billy raises an eyebrow. “No?” he asks, and rolls down the window on her side, making sure to breathe in exaggeratedly. “You smell that, Max? That’s actually shit. Cow shit.”

“I don’t see any cows.”

“Clearly you haven’t met the high school girls,” he remarks, just because he knows it’s going to make her annoyed. And yep, there it is. That exasperated look on her face, when she’s seconds from rolling her eyes at him or stomping away and slamming a door. “So what, you like it here now?”

“No,” Max says. Determined. There’s force behind her words, and Billy knows she means it.

He wrinkles his brows in confusion. “Then why are you defending it?”

“I’m not,” she says, and Billy can feel her eyes on him.

“Sure sounds like it.”

He feels her eyes shift away from him. “It’s just that we’re stuck here.”

“Hmm.”

“So...”

“You’re right. We’re stuck here.” He lowers his voice and looks over at her. “And whose fault is that?” He wants her to admit it, wants her to say it’s her fault, especially after what she said to him yesterday. So yeah. Maybe he isn’t really over that argument yet.

But Max surprises him. It’s said just loud enough that Billy hears it.

“Yours.”

Billy has to do a double take. His hand shakes on the wheel. “What you’d say?”

“Nothing,” Max quickly answer, even though they both know she made sure he’d hear her.

“Did you say it’s my fault?”

“No.”

“You know whose fault it is.” But something in him is worried that maybe she doesn’t. Maybe she really does blame him. He glances

over at her. She's staring out at the road. "Say it." Nothing, and Billy has to turn away, has to focus on driving when it feels like he might loose his grip on the steering wheel any second now. He lowers his voice in warning. "Max... Say it."

Still nothing.

And quick as a viper, Billy turns to scream in her face, "Say it!"

Max flinches, but she doesn't looks scared. Throughout the years that Billy's known her, he doesn't think she's ever looked scared. If Neil were to hit her, she probably wouldn't look scared then either. She's braver than him, but she's also stupider.

He turns the volume up, and pushes the gas pedal down, accelerating down the empty street. He taps the wheel in tune to the beat to keep her from seeing how it shakes. The cast on his right hand weighs heavily in his lap.

But, it turns out, the street isn't as empty as he'd first thought, and this is where Billy really seems to loose it.

There are four shapes biking down the side of the road ahead of them.

Max sits up straight. "Billy, slow down."

Oh. Oh, there is something in her voice there. She knows these four.

“These your stalkers, Max?”

“No! I don’t know them.”

“Right, because you can fight your own battles, isn’t that it? You don’t need me. I’m not important, am I? I’m nothing, right?”

“No! Billy, what-?”

“Fuck you, Max! Fuck you!” He glances back at the boys, coming closer by the second, and laughs. It’s sounds crazy even to his own ears. “I get bonus points if I get them all in one go? Or do you want to change seats, so you can do the honours?” *Say yes. Come on, Max, say yes. Fight back against those that hurt you.*

But Max turns in her seat so she can really look at him. “No, Billy, stop. It’s not funny.”

He turns his head to meet her gaze, stares defiantly at her. Revs the engine. Taps the wheel. Getting closer. “Billy, come on, stop it! It’s not funny! Stop!” God, she’s sounding really desperate now. Does she really think he’d run over a bunch of middle schoolers? Evidently she does, because she grabs the wheel while shouting, “Billy, stop it!”

He turns back to face the road just as the Camaro swerves and the

tires screech. He barely manages to right them again, but once he does he starts laughing manically. There's so much adrenaline pumping through his veins.

Max is glancing back behind them, and the boys must be fine, because she turns around and just hits him lightly on the arm. "What the hell is wrong with you?!"

She keeps repeating it, keeps shouting at him until they get home, and then she throws the car door open before he's even turned off the engine and rushes inside. Billy sits there laughing until he's not sure if he's started crying. The adrenaline's gone, and he just feels dead inside.

---

Billy gets his first glimpse of Harrington that evening.

He's just done a keg stand with Tommy helping to hold him up, and he's broken Harrington's record and been declared the new Keg King. Billy's got Tommy and two more guys flanking him, and they're the ones speaking, posturing and trying to rile Harrington up.

Harrington's girlfriend sighs and leaves, and Billy ignores the others to stare down Harrington. He steps a little closer and now they're measuring each other up.

Harrington looks good.

He's dressed as Tom Cruise from *Risky Business*, and Billy never saw that movie but he heard about it, so he's pretty certain his girlfriend came dressed as the hooker from the movie, which is pretty fucking funny based on how much of a prude Billy's heard her being.

But Harrington looks good. He's hot, pretty, his hair's great. Billy's just drunk enough that he'd like to run his hands through it because it just looks so soft.

Harrington's good looking, and rich, and seems preppy. Exactly the type of guy Billy imagines would be King at a school like Hawkins High.

Harrington raises both eyebrows and leaves, and Billy wants to reach out and take his hand, wants to push him up against the wall and kiss him.

He doesn't. He lets him leave to go find his girlfriend at the punch bowl, but he can't really help the little smirk when he sees them fighting later that evening.

—

Harrington plays basketball, too, it turns out.

Billy managed to get the coach to let him try out, even though his hand is broken, because Billy used to play at his old school and Billy wants - needs - to continue playing.

The coach had sighed but agreed and told him to get there during his free period.

He's pitted against Harrington, and if he's honest, Billy spends half the time shit talking and trying to push Steve's buttons. But he still manages to dribble past Steve and score a point, one handed, and coach pretty much lets him join the team then and there. He's told he'll have to sit out actually playing until his hand's healed, but at least Billy can tell Neil he's on the team again.

Halfway through, Harrington's girlfriend appears and drags him out. When he's back, he seems both sad and angry, and yeah, they've broken up. Definitely.

He keeps his eyes trained on Harrington the rest of practice, and hopes his gaze burns.

—

Billy ends up hooking up with Tina. She's a senior, so it's great for his reputation, and if nothing else, she's got great taste in music, having blasted Mötley Crüe last night at her party.

He's planning on dropping Max off at home, and then he'll ask Tina to show him to the town's record shop, and then they can go and make out by the quarry.

But Max doesn't show. She's late, third day in a row.

"So, your sister coming or what?" Tina asks, loudly pooping her bubblegum.

Billy glances at his wristwatch. Twenty minutes late. "Screw it. That little shit can skate home." He spits on the ground and walks around the Camaro towards the driver's seat. "And don't call her that."

"What?" Tina asks, sitting down in the passenger seat.

"'Sister.' She's not my sister." Once Billy had thought of her as such. Thought she could be. But not now. Not anymore. Not after what she's said to him. She's his stepsister, an unfortunate little kid forced into his life.

The records shop is tiny, just like everything here is, but Tina tells him they're going to be building a mall that should be finished come

summer.

Billy walks by a tape of classical music and does his best to ignore the clench in his stomach.

He's grateful Tina doesn't want to go further than kissing. He wasn't really certain what to expect from girls here, if they're all so conservative they've got reservations against sex before marriage or if they're so deprived of it that they'd rather rebel against their parents and immediately jump into the deep end.

But Tina just climbs over the gear lever and straddles him, roaming her hands up and down his torso and kisses his lips, guides him down to suck a couple hickeys into her neck.

Billy combs his hand through her brown hair and forces the image of Harrington's coiffed hair out of his head.

When he gets home, Max has just been home for a few minutes it turns out, because Neil pushes Billy against the wall as soon as he steps inside.

"Max just came home from school. You're supposed to drive her. What changed?"

Billy swallows. Neil's got his hand pushed up against his chest, almost at his throat. "She was late."

“Then you wait for her. She can’t skate the whole way home. Anything could happen to her and it would be your fault, do you understand that?” Neil hisses.

“Yes. Sir.”

“Good. Or I’ll break your other hand, too, and then you can have an excuse not to drive your sister. Respect and responsibility, Billy.”

---

Billy spends basketball practice the next day on the bench, staring at Harrington play. Which is also how he spent most of practice yesterday.

Tommy’s goading him on, and Harrington seems both irritated and tired. He’s blocking Tommy from the hoop, but Tommy dribbles past and shoulder checks him so he falls to the floor, jumping up and shooting the ball through the hoop. Coach blows his whistle and tells them practice is over.

Harrington’s still on the ground when Billy stands up, and he goes over to him, holds his hand out. Harrington grabs it, and his palm is warm and sweaty against Billy’s.

Billy hoists him up a little and bends down. “You were moving your feet. Plant them next time, draw a charge,” he says, and lets go so Steve falls back down.

He lingers in the showers just long enough to hear Tommy telling Harrington his (ex) girlfriend’s already running around with other guys. He sounds like a hyena when he laughs, Tommy. Billy rolls his eyes and leaves. He doesn’t have an excuse to stay in the changing room when he’s not even done anything other than watch them play.

---

Neil doesn’t like black people.

Neil is a racist arse on top of all his other shitty qualities, and it is because of this that Billy realises, when he sees a black kid running after Max as she storms away from the middle school towards the Camaro, that this is something he’s going to have to deal with before Neil finds out.

Because Billy’s responsible for Max, and it’s enough that she’s being creeped on by boys in her class without having to add Neil’s racism to it.

It's clear the two of them are fighting, the boy running after her even as she tries to get away. Billy can't hear what he's saying, but he catches some of what Max is. Seems like they're bullying her because she's a girl. That they think less of her for it, or something. Billy knows Max, and he's pretty certain she's not going to stand for it.

She turns around one final time with, "You still stink, by the way!" shouted over her shoulder as she marches up to the Camaro. The boy turns around and starts walking back up to the school.

"That kid you were talking to, who is he?" Billy asks as he rounds the car.

"He's no one."

"No one?"

"This kid from my class." She gets in, but Billy stays watching the boy for a second with his hand on the door. The kid looks back at them, and Billy frowns as he sits down in the driver's seat.

"Why was he talking to you?"

"It was just another stupid class assignment." But she sounds like she's seconds from crying.

"Then why're you so upset?"

“I’m not!”

“He causing you trouble? He one of the boys stalking you?”

She turns to look at him, presses her lips into a thin line. “Why do you care?”

“Because, Max, you’re a piece of shit. But we’re family, whether we like it or not, meaning I’m stuck looking out for you.”

She has the audacity to roll her eyes. “What would I ever do without—”

“Hey! This is serious shit, okay? I’m older than you. And something you learn is that there are certain types of people in this world that you stay away from,” *People like Neil, people like those who dare creep on you and then act as though you should be grateful, and, while you’re still living with Neil Hargrove, you learn to stay away from people Neil doesn’t like.* “And that kid, Max... That kid is one of them. You stay away from him, you hear me? Stay away.”

She really does look ready to cry. “I thought they wanted to be my friends,” she whispers. Billy thinks he might be starting to get it. In his mind, Max has always been this strong, independent little shit, bullheaded and with her own strong will. But maybe it’s different here, away from all her friends and everything familiar. She’s from California, and that’s got to be cool to the losers here, but she’s not really girly, she doesn’t fit in with the picture of a traditional girl in

Hawkins, so maybe she's actually starting to feel insecure. What a strange fucking concept. Maxine Mayfield. Insecure.

Billy's pretty certain she's only talking to him because she needs to get this out and she has no one else to talk to. He starts driving and stays silent to really listen.

"They act like they're this great group of friends, but then they try to get me to join them and then they shut me out. There's one of them, Will, and he gets these... episodes. He got lost in the woods last year and somebody drowned in the quarry and they thought it was him so they had a funeral for him and everything."

*Jesus fucking Christ.*

"And then this other guy, he doesn't like me, or, he said he doesn't know me but he doesn't want to get to know me either, and it's not because I'm a girl because they already had a girl friend but she's gone and it's like, can't you have two you little shit? But apparently not, because I thought he started to like me yesterday but then Will had another episode and now they're all shutting me out again."

Billy's starting to realise he isn't above punching a thirteen year old, because Max is actually sniffling beside him now.

"And- And yesterday Dustin found some... toad, a- a pollywog, or something, in his trash and he brought it to school and made me hold it, and it was really slimy and disgusting and then it escaped so we spent all afternoon looking for it yesterday. That's why I was late. I spent this morning going through the dumpsters at school looking for

it. And they're still keeping secrets from me and shutting me out, like we're little kids!"

Billy glances over at her without moving his head and decides to take a chance. "You certain you don't want me to run them over? We could just put their bikes on the road and do that, they don't need to be on them."

It has the desired effect and Max hiccups a laugh. "It would serve them right."

"Yeah, shitbird. It would. No one messes with you other than me."

---

Max manages to convince their parents to let her hang out at the Arcade for an hour on Saturday. Billy figures she might need to spend some time shooting shit in there to work through her frustrations from this past week.

"If you're not out in an hour-" he starts as he drops her off.

"Walking home. Yeah, yeah, I know," Max says, grabbing her skateboard and stepping out.

That's not really what Billy'd been about to say, because he remembers what Neil told him two days ago, but oh well. Let her believe he'd let her walk alone again. "Watch the attitude, shitbird," he settles for saying instead.

He drives back home and starts working on his schoolwork. The problem with changing schools in the middle of term is that some of the shit they're doing now is stuff that Billy's already done, and some of it is stuff he's just been dropped in the middle of and left to figure out by himself.

When Max' hour is close to up he gets back in the Camaro and drives off to the Arcade. And sees the same boy from yesterday behind her as she rushes out through the front door.

*For fuck's sake, Maxine.*

He hangs his good hand out through the window and leans back, turning away from her as she gets in.

"The hell I tell you?"

"I'm not late." She sounds confused, almost like she really doesn't get what he's on about.

"You know what I'm talking about."

“Oh, Lucas?”

Billy scoffs, smiles a little. “So the stalker has a name now, huh?”

“It’s a small town, okay? We weren’t hanging out.”

“Hmm. Well, you know what happens when you lie.” It’s a very standard order of business. Max lies, Neil finds out, and he breaks Billy.

“I’m not lying.”

He just turns his head lazily to look at her, and then drives. Through the rear view mirror he sees Lucas step out and looks after the car. Beside Billy, Max turns around and must see him, because she sighs, sinking down heavily into her seat.

“We weren’t hanging out. Really. He paid the guy who works there to tell me the machine was out of order and then led me to the back, where Lucas told me this crazy ass story. He tried to convince me it was real, but it sounded like something out of my comics. It’s just...”

“Just what?” Billy says, a little intrigued despite himself.

“He seemed to believe it.” She shakes her head. “It doesn’t matter.

He's a shit, and I don't care, anyway. Can I ask you something?"

Billy raises an eyebrow. "Shoot."

"You going to keep playing the cello here? When your hand heals?"

Billy sighs. "I don't know," he tells her, truthfully. This is a small town, and he's already got a reputation at school. It might be hard to hide he's playing, and if anyone were to find out it would surely only be a matter of days until it gets to Neil. The only upside to this shit had been that Neil broke his right hand, the one he holds the bow in. If Billy were to keep playing and Neil were to find out, maybe he'd go a step further and cut off one of Billy's fingers on his left, the one he uses to press down on the strings. He feels a little nauseous at the thought. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Okay." And they don't.

---

Neil and Susan fuck off sometime after noon on Sunday. Billy's told to watch Max, that they'll be out for a couple hours and back in the evening. That he can order them pizza because they'll probably go out for dinner. Date night. To celebrate Susan getting a job.

Billy barely pays those words any attention. Tina's friend asked him out on a date - wonder how long that friendship is going to last - and Billy figures it's good to keep his reputation as a womaniser going.

Billy's bedroom's too small to fit his weights, so they're pushed up against the corner in the living room, and he sits there working out and smoking while listening to Ratt because he refuses to let both his biceps go weak just because he can't lift with one hand.

He's at twenty-two when the doorbell rings. Max knows he's lifting weights. And Max also knows that he's not going to stop just because there's someone at the door. They haven't been here long enough for it to be anyone important, anyway.

"Max are you getting that or what?"

"Okay!"

"Swear to God, Max!"

She rushes to the door, and Billy hears her hurry to close it behind her when she gets there. Huh. That's... interesting.

He puts his dumbbell to the side and stands up, starting to walk over to the front door.

Max gets back inside before he's had the time to get there and open

it.

“Who the hell were you talking to?” he asks, leaning against the wall so she can’t just rush back to her room.

It takes her a second to answer. To come up with a lie. “Mormons.”

He huffs a laugh and cigarette smoke is released from his lungs. “Mormons?”

“Talkative ones.” She pushes past him and he lets her go, walking up to ten door and opening it. There’s no one there.

Billy shrugs and goes back to his weights.

—

He doesn’t hear Susan and Neil come home over the sound of Metallica’s *The Four Horsemen*. They’re late, but Billy figures they’re coming home anytime now. Has thought that for the last three hours.

A few minutes ago he’d knocked on Max’ door and told her he was ordering her a pizza, and that he’d be gone so she’d have to pick it up

at the door when the delivery guy arrived. She hadn't answered but she'd had to have heard him. She's been in her room all afternoon, doing god knows what.

He's getting ready for his date when Susan knocks on his bedroom door.

"Billy?"

"Yeah, I'm a little bit busy in here, Susan."

"Open the door! Right now!" That's Neil, and he sounds angry, punctuating the last two words.

Billy hesitates for a second, before stubbing his cigarette out and going over to open the door.

The look on Susan's face is worried, while Neil just looks angry. They're still dressed in their coats, so it looks like they just came home. Billy doesn't get it. "What's wrong?"

"Why don't you tell us?" Neil says.

"Because I *don't know.* "

“We can’t find Maxine,” Susan speaks up. Billy knows Max hates when they call her by that name, and wonders what she’d say knowing her own mother does it behind her back.

“And her window’s open,” Neil adds and *oh, shit. No, no, no, no.* This is bad. Really bad. “Where is she?!”

“I don’t know,” Billy says weakly.

Neil raises his eyebrows, shakes his head in feigned disbelief. “You don’t know?” he repeats with a scoff. Of course Billy doesn’t know. He knows he’s not allowed to let her out at this time of night, so if she’s not here, then she’s left without Billy knowing. Shit, it sounds like they’re talking about a dog and not a human being with her own free will.

“Look, I’m sure she just, I don’t know, went to the Arcade or something.” He turns around, knows it’s risky, but hopes that acting as if everything’s okay will reassure them. “I’m sure she’s fine.”

He reaches for his leather jacket as he hears Neil step into his room. “You were supposed to watch her.”

Billy sighs. “I know, dad. I was. It’s just that you guys were three hours late, and... Well, I have a date.” With a girl. *Look, dad, I’m straight as can be. Already out fucking with girls after barely being here a week. No cello playing fags here.* “I’m sorry, okay?” He turns around to face Neil and tries to look sincere as he pulls his jacket on.

Neil's arms are crossed and he nods to himself. "So that's why you've been staring at yourself in the mirror like some faggot instead of watching your sister?"

That just about breaks something in him.

"I have been looking after her all week, dad! Okay, she wants to run off, that's her problem, alright?" Neil's jaw is working, and Billy knows that means trouble, but he's on a roll and can't stop. He knew how this was going to end the second he found out Max ran off. It doesn't matter what he says at this point. "She's thirteen years old, she shouldn't need a full-time babysitter."

He turns off his stereo, and in the split second that he's distracted, Neil pounces. He fists Billy's shirt and pushes him up against the bookcase. Billy gasps for air.

Neil doesn't shout. He might, in the lead up, but not during. Neil lowers his voice and speaks calmly. Like he's right, like what he's doing is *right*. No regrets. "What did we talk about?"

When Billy doesn't answer, Neil slaps his face to the side with as much force as he did when he found out Billy went against him and started playing the cello. Susan lets out a whimper that mirrors Billy's own, but Billy doesn't care about her right now. He's on the floor, and a second later Neil is placing a well aimed kick against his ribs before dragging him back up again. He grabs his chin, tilts Billy's head up. Exposes his neck. One punch there and Billy won't be able to breathe. Will throw up.

“What... did... we... talk about?”

“Respect and responsibility,” Billy bites out.

“That is right.” He sounds pleased. Billy’s going to vomit. “Now. Apologise to Susan.”

It takes him a second, but he does it. “I’m sorry, Susan.”

“It’s okay, Neil, really—“

“No, it’s not okay! *Nothing* about his behaviour is okay.” He meets Billy’s gaze. “But he’s going to make up for it.” He steps away from Billy and turns to Susan. “He’s going to call... whatever whore he’s seeing tonight, and cancel their date.” Susan looks down at the ground, and Neil turns back to face Billy as he continues. “And then. He’s going to go find his sister. Like the good, kind, respecting brother that he is. Isn’t that right, Billy?”

Billy doesn’t look at him, he looks at Susan. Wonders if she’s going to do something. Anything. If listening to classical music and driving him to the hospital and seeing the result of what Neil did to his hand means anything at all to her.

“Isn’t that right?!” Neil shouts and steps closer, and Billy shifts his eyes to him.

“Yes, sir,” he whispers.

Neil sighs deeply. “I’m sorry, I couldn’t hear you.”

He turns his head to the side, and had Billy been braver, had he been more like Max, he might’ve bitten his ear off. But he isn’t, so all he can really do is try to keep his voice from shaking as he says, a little louder, “Yes. Sir.”

Neil looks at him, and Billy is certain he’s going to die tonight unless he does what Neil wants. “Find Max.”

Susan steps to the side to let Neil pass, and follows him outside, closing the door behind them. Billy throws his keys to the ground and brings his hands up to cover his face as a couple tears slip out.

He hurries to compose himself before Neil can come back, and leans down to grab his keys. His middle protests at the movement, and he aches where Neil kicked him.

The hallway outside his bedroom’s empty, and he can hear soft voices from behind the closed door to the master bedroom. Billy hurries outside and into the Camaro, pulling away from the driveway.

The Camaro’s a comforting, familiar rumble beneath him, and it grounds him. Settles him a little.

But it's only then that he realises he has no idea where Max could be. He can't come up with a good idea for why she'd sneak out to the Arcade, and it's probably closed by now, anyway.

So where is she?

There's that mystery person who came ringing their doorbell earlier, whom Max clearly didn't want him to see. Could it be Lucas? Or... Dustin? Was that his name? Did they convince Max to go with them?

But she wouldn't sneak out for that, would she? She's made it clear she doesn't like them, that they're creepy and stalking her. That they're messing with her and won't let her hang out with them but won't let her hang out with anyone else, either. Dustin had forced some slime creature on to her and made her go looking through trash when the thing ran away.

It doesn't sound good. None of that shit sounds good. At least Billy's glad Max hadn't confided in her mother, because he can only imagine the shitstorm that would have brought him when their parents found her gone.

For lack of a better plan other than drive around all of Hawkins and hoping to see her red hair, he drives to the Arcade. There's one old beat up pickup truck left in the car park, so somebody must still be there.

He parks the Camaro and wander over to the door, tries it. Locked. He pounds on it instead, and a couple seconds later a light somewhere deeper inside turns on. A few more seconds of relentless

pounding, and a guy appears on the other side, opening the door.

He's a weasel looking kind of dude, probably a year or two older than Billy, and his face is covered in acne. "We're closed," he says in a deadpan voice.

"Yeah, listen, I don't care. My sister likes to hang out here, about yea high. Redhead. Yesterday you or one of your coworker helped a kid called Lucas lure her into the back?"

The guy looks slightly panicked. "Listen, if Lucas did something, then I don't."

"I don't care about you. Do you know who Lucas is or not?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I know Lucas."

"You know where he lives?"

"No."

"You know his last name, then?"

The guys nods. "Yeah. Sinclair."

“Okay. You got a phonebook?”

“Yeah, in the back-“

“Go and get it.”

He turns to go, but pauses then, looking back at Billy and narrowing his eyes. “What do I get in return?”

“I won’t knock your teeth out, that’s what you’ll get,” Billy grits out and sees the guy swallow before he scrambles to get Billy what he’d asked for.

He can’t help but wonder if Max actually did sneak out. He doesn’t want to believe it, because she has to know what would’ve happened to him if she did, doesn’t she? He doesn’t want to believe she’d do that to him.

But then the only other viable option is that one of those little shits kidnapped her. Billy’s going to fucking murder them if that’s true.

A couple minutes later and Billy’s pulling up outside the Sinclairs’.

A little girl answers the door.

She takes one look at Billy, at his unbuttoned shirt and tight pants and leather jacket and jewellery, and then turns around to shout inside the house, “Mum! There’s a prostitute on our doorstep!” She turns back to give Billy a grin and he sneers back at her. She closes the door in his face.

It opens a minute later and this time there’s a woman whom Billy presumes is Mrs. Sinclair on the other side.

“I apologise for my daughter...?”

“Billy. I’m looking for my sister. We just moved here and she’s started hanging out with Lucas, but she was supposed to be home by now.”

She doesn’t look shocked to her about Max’ existence, so Lucas must’ve talked about her. “Oh! They’re not here, but the Wheeler’s are usually the designated hangout spot. I know Lucas was going to sleep over with the other boys, but I didn’t know Max was...?”

“No, well. Neither did we. Thank you for your help,” he says.

“If you wait here I’ll call Joyce, she usually keeps track of Will’s whereabouts.”

She leaves Billy there on the steps for a minute before she’s back, frowning. “No answer, sadly. Well, let me give you the directions to

the Wheelers'. They're probably there, anyway."

Mrs. Wheeler opens the door when he gets there, and Billy's starting to wonder where the fuck the men in these families are. She's barely dressed, and her gaze immediately falls on Billy's open shirt.

She wants to flirt. God, Billy didn't sign up for horny mothers on top of everything else.

"You must be here for Nancy."

Nancy? Harrington's ex-girlfriend is the sister to one of Max' little stalkers? It really is a small fucking town.

"Oh no, she's not my type," Billy says with a laugh. *I prefer them a little bit more... well, male*, he thinks.

Mrs. Wheeler evidently takes it the wrong way though, because her smile widens, and she looks up at him from beneath her lashes. Jesus Christ. Her husband needs to do better. She's objectively attractive, and she must be lacking in the attention and love she deserves to be so openly flirting with a teenager. Her daughter's goddamn classmate no less.

Billy thinks about Miss Adams pushing him away and has to force down the bile that wants to rise up his throat. He needs to get out of here.

"I'm looking for my little sister Max," he says. "She's been missing all day and I'm worried. We just moved here, and she started hanging out with your son's group of friends. I checked the Sinclairs but Mrs. Sinclair told me they usually hang out at your place?"

Mrs. Wheeler invites him inside, and Billy digs his nail into the skin on a finger of his broken hand to keep from screaming.

She writes down directions, because apparently they should be at the Byers, and the Byers live far off.

"Tell Mike to hurry home if you see him, will you? Or to call me."

Billy nods, grabs the paper she's written on, and gets the hell out of there.

The Byers live even more out in Nowhere, Indiana, than Billy thought possible. It's a shabby little one floor house in the middle of the fucking woods, and if Billy wasn't already creeped out he'd really be by now.

And then, acting as the fucking cherry on top, *Harrington* steps out of the house.

What the actual fuck is going on here?

“Am I dreaming or is that you, Harrington?”

“Yeah, it’s me. Don’t cream your pants.”

Billy actually did have a goddamn wet dream about Harrington two nights ago, but that’s neither here nor there.

He pulls his jacket off, throws it back into the car. It catches a little on the cast, and in the time it takes to get it fully off Harrington has stepped closer. “What are you doing here, amigo?”

“I could ask you the same thing. *Amigo* .”

“Looking for my stepsister. A little birdie told me she was here.”

“Huh, that’s weird. I don’t know her.”

*I fucking hope you don’t. Because you’re right, this is really weird, and I don’t need to be having wet dreams about my sister’s wannabe rapist.*

“Small? Redhead? Bit of a bitch?”

“Doesn’t ring a bell. Sorry, buddy.”

Billy looks down, sighs. Wishes he had a cigarette to calm his nerves, but he can't both smoke and drive with only one working hand so he hadn't bothered. "You know, I don't know, this..." He clicks his tongue, takes a step closer. "This whole situation, Harrington, I don't know. It's giving me the heebie-jeebies," he says honestly.

"Oh, yeah? Why's that?" *Don't fuck with me, Harrington, you're not as stupid as you look.*

"My thirteen year old sister goes missing all day. And then I find her with *you*. In a stranger's house. With a bunch of boys who I know have been creeping on her all week, because she told me, and then you lie to me about it?"

Harrington has the audacity to chuckle. "Man, were you dropped too much as a child, or what?" Yes, Billy was. Knocked to the ground, too. Billy grins, wets his lips. "I don't know what you don't understand about what I just said. She's not here."

He tilts his head a little, gestures with his broken hand at the window behind Harrington. The window Billy's been seeing Max' scared face next to three panicked boys' for the past two minutes. "Then who is that?"

Harrington follows his gaze. "Oh, shit. Listen-"

Billy doesn't let him try any more lies, just pushes him to the ground and hisses, "I told you to plant your feet," before stepping past him and throwing the door open.

And Jesus fucking Christ. Billy doesn't know if this is worse than what he'd thought he'd see. At least everyone's got their clothes on, at least Max doesn't seem hurt, but this place? It's a fucking madhouse. There are drawings, of the same fucking purple tubes, taped all over the walls so they look like the million crawling legs of a thousand spiders. And there's no adults here, just Harrington. Where the hell are the Byers?

His eyes immediately zero in on the boy who's been giving his sister so much grief this past week, and who might be giving Billy worse than that if he continues like this.

"Lucas Sinclair! What a surprise." He stomps up to him, tries to stare the kid down.

"Billy, go away," Max says from beside him, and Billy turns to stare at her, incredulous.

"Go away"? I've been looking for you for an hour! How do you think our parents reacted when they came home and you were gone?!"

"I'm sorry. Okay? I'm sorry, but I had to go, I had to sneak out. This is important."

"Oh yeah? Is it more important than my fucking life?! Huh, Maxine, is it?" He holds his hand up to her, and relishes in how she flinches at her full name, at being reminded of his injury. The one she inadvertently caused. She takes a step back and he feels some of the

anger fizzle out, feels so fucking defeated, so fucking *betrayed*. “Is it?” Billy says, and it comes out as a whisper.

“Hargrove-“ Sinclair starts, and yeah, alright. Now the anger’s back.

He rushes at the kid, backs him up against the wall.

“Get off of me!”

“*You*. Since Max won’t listen to me maybe you will. You stay away from her. You hear me?” He glances over his shoulder, at the other two boys here. “All of you! You stay the fuck away from her!” Sinclair tries wiggling free, and Billy pushes him up against the wall again. He lowers his head so they’re eye level, and makes sure he’s meeting his gaze. “You made her fucking cry, and now she’s here, with you. I don’t know what kind of fucking shit you’ve dragged her into, but I’m taking her home, away from this- this fucking insanity, and-“

“I said get off of me!” Sinclair shouts and drives his knee up in between Billy’s legs, making him stumble backwards and let go.

“Hey, man, don’t“ Harrington seems to have found his way off the ground and into the house, because he lays a hand on Billy’s shoulder. Billy turns around, wrenches it off.

He points at Sinclair, still standing by the wall and staring at Billy. “You are so dead, Sinclair! You’re dead.”

Then Harrington's there, behind him again, and grabbing Billy's shoulder and turning him around to face him. "No. You are."

He punches Billy in the face, a punch to almost rival Neil's, and Billy stumbles back. There's hot blood welling up in his nose and trailing down from it. Max lets out a shout and Billy starts laughing. He straightens up and faces Harrington with his arms spread out. "Looks like you've got some fire in you after all, huh? I've been waiting to meet this King Steve everybody's been telling me so much about."

Harrington pushes at his chest. "Get out."

Billy stares at him for a second and for a moment everything's silent. Then he's taking a swing at him but Harrington's ducking, and punching back at once. He gets in a couple of good hits while one of the little shits screams at him to murder Billy.

He still doesn't know what the fuck Harrington is doing here, but it doesn't look good, a guy older than him with a bunch of boys and Billy's little sister, in a madhouse in the woods, and it's only been a few months since Billy broke down with Miss Adams because he thought he was supposed to sleep with her and for some reason that's all he can think about when he pulls back and punches Harrington square in the nose.

He goes down, but he drags Billy with him, and they end up rolling on the floor, fighting for dominance. There's a rushing in his ears, and pain in both his hands, and Billy isn't really certain what is going on but he's been worked up for two weeks and it's all coming out now. He's going back to his old outlet, before he started playing the

cello, and it feels so fucking good to get to defend himself, to push back, to hurt those who've hurt him and who've hurt Max and he thinks that maybe, when Harrington stops hitting back, then Billy will get up and take Max away from this shit and drive them home and knock his dad out, too.

“Billy!” Max voice breaks through the haze. “Billy, stop! Stop! Steve, no, don’t, his-! Billy, your hand!”

And then suddenly, there’s the pinch of something in his neck, and Billy reaches up, still fucking uncoordinated, and pulls out a syringe from the back of his head. He stands up on wobbly legs, turns around. “Max?” he mumbles, disbelieving, tongue thick in his mouth.

She’s staring wide eyed at him, shaking. “I’m sorry,” she whispers, and Billy crashes to the floor and passes out.

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He wakes aching. There’s pain in his neck, travelling up to the back of his head. Both hands hurt, the broken one especially, and his dad must have gotten in a bunch of pretty good hits before Billy managed to curl up because his ribs and stomach both hurt.

But that doesn’t really make sense, because Billy’s lying on something soft, and Billy doesn’t remember dragging himself up to his bed.

He blinks his eyes open and squeezes them shut again. The light makes his head throb, and for the second they were open everything was swimming, making him nauseous.

He spares a minute to get in some measured breaths before trying again.

A couch comes into focus. Definitely not one Billy's ever lied on before. He turns his head to the side and sees swirly drawings all over the floor and-

Yeah, alright. Now he remembers.

*Max .*

He drags himself up to sitting and pushes down the nausea. He's breathing harshly, and he has to blink a couple times before his vision goes back to normal.

The living room of the nuthouse is empty. Early morning light is shining in through the window.

A giant of a man steps inside and freezes when his eyes land on Billy's trembling form.

“Max,” Billy breathes. “Max, where’s- Where is my sister? What did you... What did you do to her? Where is she?!”

The man hurries forward, reaches out as though he’s about to touch him. Billy flinches back and the man settles for holding his hands up in a placating manner. “Easy, kid, relax. She’s fine.”

Billy struggles to take in a full breath. It’s morning, and Max is gone, and Neil is going to kill him. “Where is she?!” He glances around, at the mess of a house. “What is this place? You’ve got some- Some child-sex-trafficking ring going on here? That what she injected me with? You kidnap kids and teenagers and sedate them with that shit? They told me a girl disappeared last year!”

The man looks shocked. “No! No, what the hell-?”

“I’m going to call the fucking cops!” Billy shouts, which yeah, might be a little stupid to declare to the man who’s probably kidnapped his sister and is probably kidnapping Billy, too.

“Kid. I am the ‘fucking cops’. Chief Hopper.”

Billy laughs. “Right. Of course you are. Probably easier to hide an operation like that if you’ve got the Chief of Police on your side, right?”

Hopper shakes his head. “What the hell, kid? What is it with you- You sound like Murray. This isn’t like that. This isn’t *anything* like

that.”

“Then where is my sister?!”

“She’s home, kid. Steve drove her home.”

“What?”

“Listen. She was hanging out with her friends, they forgot the time, Joyce had to go with Will to the hospital so she called Steve to take care of the kids, she’s had problems with the phone and it stopped working. Then you showed up and misjudged the situation, alright, no one’s blaming you. Steve drove them all home when Joyce got back and she called me to take care of you. Okay?”

“No. No, what-?”

“I’ll drive you home now and we won’t say anything about you showing up here. We’ll say you ended up in a fight while looking for your sister and then your car broke down and I found you on the side of the road. That sound good?”

Billy’s feeling blindsided. None of this makes sense. “No. No, that’s not what- That’s not what happened!”

“It is. I’m telling you it is.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Hopper shrugs. “Tough luck.” He grabs Billy around his upper arm and hauls him to his feet. He stumbles, would’ve fallen back down if it weren’t for the Chief. He keeps his hand there as he leads him outside. Walking hurts like all hell and Billy’s certain he’s going to pass out or just lie down and die. Pass out and then die. Yeah. That sounds about right.

He’s pushed into the back of a police car.

It doesn’t matter what Billy’s excuse is, doesn’t matter how good it is, if he gets home in a police car Neil won’t spare a second to listen. Billy’s going to die.

It’s cold. It’s November. It’s Monday, and Billy’s got school in just a few hours. Last night he’d been warm from a mix of adrenaline and worry churning in his gut, but now he’s shivering in just his red shirt.

He figures he’s just going to stay alive long enough to make sure Max is alright.

The ride back to Cherry is a hazy blur. It feels like he closes his eyes and when they open next the Chief’s pulling his door open and reaching inside to drag him out.

He keeps a tight grip on Billy's upper arm and Billy's grateful for it, certain he'd collapse if it wasn't there.

But then he blinks and Neil's there, walking out of the house and towards them. He can only imagine what this must look like to Neil. Max, being driven home by some unknown guy with a bunch of boys in the car and Billy, coming home in a police car in the early hours of the morning with the Chief of Police dragging him by the arm.

Billy's feet refuse to move. He comes to a stop right then and there, but Hopper's still walking so he almost makes Billy face plant on the dirty ground before he catches up to the fact that Billy's gone still.

"Officer?" Neil asks.

Hopper spares a second to glance at Billy before he's looking up to face Neil. "Chief, actually. Chief Hopper. You new in town?"

"Just moved here last week," Neil answers. "My son already out causing trouble?"

Billy's going to collapse. He's going to throw up. He's going to die.

"Nah," Hopper says. "He told me he ended up in a fight while looking for his sister, and I just found him on the side of the road. His car broke down and he got lost, trying to find his way back into town."

“I see.” To an outsider, Neil sounds completely fine. Calm. To Billy, he sounds dangerous. He’s not believing a word Hopper’s saying.

“Yeah. She home safe?”

“Maxine? A friend’s brother dropped her off a few hours back.”

“Good. That’s good.” Hopper sighs, lets go off Billy’s arm. “Well. I’ll be on my way, then. Have a good day. Or, morning, I guess.”

“You too, Chief,” Neil says with a nod, and turns to glare at Billy as Hopper turns around to go back to his car.

Whatever Max drugged him with must still be going through his system. It’s the only explanation for what happens next.

Billy, for the first time in his life when it comes to Neil, lets his fear show through.

“Wait,” he chokes out, voice breaking.

Hopper turns back, raises his eyebrows. “Yes?”

“Don’t- Don’t leave me here. Please. Please, *please*, please don’t leave me here.”

Billy can hear the frown in Hopper's voice when he says, "Hargrove? Kid?" but Billy's not looking at him. He's caught in the death glare Neil is sending his way.

"Please, I- Please, he's going to kill me, please, I can't- I'm sorry, I'm sorry, sir, I tried to find her, please-“ Billy stumbles backwards, doesn't really feel his legs go out but suddenly he's on the ground, so they must've. He can't breathe.

The front door slams open and Max appears.

"Maxine!" Neil shouts. "Back to bed! You've got school in a few hours and you've been out all night."

Max ignores him. "Billy!" she calls, and comes running, falling down beside him on the grass.

"I'm sorry," Billy repeats, looking down at his lap. He can feel everyone's eyes on him. "Neil's going- Neil's going to kill me, when you leave, so please don't go, please, I-“ his voice cracks, and he lets out a sob, curling up even though it hurts.

"Neil broke Billy's hand," he hears Max say. "Right before we left California. He forced his hand out and slammed the car door closed on it, and then he made him drive for three days like that before he let my mum take him to the hospital."

There's a heavy hand on his shoulder and Billy flinches, but Max reaches out, takes his good hand in hers. Billy looks up and meets her gaze. She gives him a small, weak smile.

Behind he, he sees Neil, and his breathing speeds up before Max shifts to block him from sight. The big hand on his shoulder moves and becomes two beneath his armpits, hurling him to his feet. Billy cries out when the movement shifts something in his rib cage.

"Sorry, sorry, kid, shit. You're okay," Hopper mutters, moving to hold his arms instead. "Max, come on."

Billy doesn't look back as he's led back to the car and into the backseat. Max climbs in after him on the other side.

"You can't take my children away!" Neil shouts after them. "This is kidnapping!"

"It would be child endangerment to leave them here!" Hopper shouts back, closing the door and rounding the car. Billy doesn't hear what Neil answers, but when Hopper opens the door on the driver's side he hears the last of their conversations. "And do what? I'm the Chief of Police!" Hopper laughs, and slams the door shut.

He pulls out onto Cherry and drives away.

"Where are we going?" Max asks.

“Hospital,” Hopper answers. “And then the station. You’re never going back here again.”

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

This chapter turned out to mostly be Max And Billy Shouting At Each Other In The Camaro, haha.

Thank you for reading and please do tell me what you thought!

### **Author's Note:**

I hope you guys liked it! Please leave kudos if you did, or a comment to tell me your thoughts!

This will probably be three parts because I’m doing all through season two and three (yes, again, hallelujah, I know, I want to say I’m sorry for putting you guys through this again, but quite frankly, if you’re here reading this, it’s most likely because you want to read it, so, hey, we’re in the same boat!). I started re-watching Season Two, and oh, boy, did I realise Billy had little to no screen time. Well, more fun for me to try to change that!